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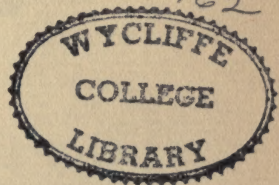
AUGUST, 1889

By H. P. LIDDON, D.D., D.C.L., LL.D.

LATE CANON RESIDENTIARY AND CHANCELLOR OF ST. PAUL'S

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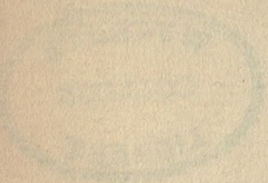
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TO

MY DEAR SISTER,

ANNIE POOLE KING,

IN THE JOYFUL CONVICTION

THAT AS OUR DAYS ON EARTH ARE

DRAWING TOWARDS THEIR CLOSE

WE ARE MORE AND MORE UNITED

IN HEART AND MIND

WITH RESPECT TO THOSE THINGS THAT ARE

OF LASTING VALUE.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

THIS edition has no advantage over its predecessor, beyond the improvement of a few phrases of doubtful meaning. But a friend, to whose criticisms the writer attaches particular value, remarks that in these sermons too much is made of the historical import of the Magnificat to leave room for doing justice to its practical aspects. To this, perhaps, it may be replied that the historical occasion of the Magnificat is of greater relative importance than is the case with any other Psalm or Hymn that ever was uttered.^a If so much be granted,—and what Christian can hesitate to grant it?—the question is reduced to one of time and space. It might have been better to devote eight sermons to such a subject than four; but, in days like ours, it would have been more difficult to secure attention. For the rest, the bearing of the Hymn of Mary on our daily

^a A sentence to this effect might well have been introduced at p. 8.

lives lies more on the surface of the language than does its relation to the Incarnation. And its practical value for us is likely to be enriched and intensified if we bear in mind as much as may be, when the words that are so often on our lips were first uttered, and by whom.

3, AMEN COURT, ST. PAUL'S, E.C.,
Whitsuntide, 1890.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

THESSE sermons are published for the reason which has compelled the recent publication of some earlier volumes. If a man's words are in any case to remain behind him, he would rather give them to the world himself, and correctly. The author cannot be responsible for any version of these discourses which does not bear the name of his present publishers.

It has not been an object with him to discuss the grave controversies which at once present themselves when the name and office of our Lord's Blessed Mother come into question. If her true place in the hearts of Christians has been often exaggerated, it has been as often unrecognized or denied. If the language and practice of some Christians with respect to her may seem to encroach on what is due to the incommunicable and awful prerogatives of God, the terms in which she is referred to by others would appear to show that they have forgotten Whose Mother she is, and what He may be thinking of

a lack of love and reverence for her on the part of those who own His Name. In these sermons it has seemed better to dwell on the inspired language which she herself has left us; and for the rest to bear in mind the wise words of Bishop Pearson:^a "If Elisabeth cried out with so loud a voice, 'Blessed art thou among women,' when Christ was but newly conceived in Mary's womb, what expressions of honour and admiration can we think sufficient now that Christ is in heaven and that Mother with Him! Far be it from any Christian to derogate from that special privilege granted her which is incommunicable to any other. We cannot bear too reverent a regard unto the Mother of our Lord, so long as we give her not that worship which is due unto the Lord Himself. Let us keep the language of the Primitive Church: 'Let her be honoured and esteemed, let Him be worshipped and adored.'"

3, AMEN COURT, E.C.,
Advent Sunday, 1889.

^a Pearson, *On the Creed* Art. III. p. 218. Oxford: 1847.

I.

MARY OUR MODEL IN PRAISING
GOD.

ST. LUKE I. 46-48.

*And Mary said,
My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden.*

No fact is more attested by wide experience, and few facts are more pregnant with significance and warning, than the tendency of the human mind to lose its hold of the sense and power of language, especially of religious language, after constantly repeating it. Words, although sacred, and designed for universal use by the Highest of all authorities, and richly endowed with spiritual power, do yet become to us, through the process of constant usage, barren and unfruitful, unless an effort be made from time to time to recover and reassert in the human mind their original sense and import. So it is even with that most sacred Prayer which our Lord Himself prescribed for the use of His disciples. Neither the associations of ages, nor

the varied experiences of our own souls, which have gathered round the several petitions of the Lord's Prayer, will avail to save us from saying it in a thoughtless and formal way, unless we constantly remind ourselves of what it means; of what it has meant to millions, of what it might mean to ourselves. And as this is true of words which our Lord Himself bids us use, so it is no less true of other inspired words, which His Church has selected from the Sacred Records, as being especially suited for constant employment in public worship. It holds good of those psalms which, like the ninety-fifth or the hundredth, or the seven psalms of Penitence, have been chosen for frequent use on account of their spiritual intensity; and even of those three hymns in which the earliest saints of the New Testament heralded the Birth of the Divine Redeemer—the song of Zacharias,^a or the Benedictus; the song of Simeon,^b or the Nunc Dimittis; and the song of Mary,^c or the Magnificat. In view of this tendency to lose our hold on the sense of language which on account of its excellence we repeat most frequently, it may be well to devote the Sunday afternoons of the present month, to such consideration as time will permit, of the familiar, but

^a St. Luke i. 68-79.^b *Ib.* ii. 29-32.^c *Ib.* i. 46-55.

not always well-understood words of the first in order and the greatest of Christian hymns—the Magnificat.

I.

There is no mistaking the prominence assigned in the English Prayer-book, as in many older Prayer-books of the Christian Church, to the Hymn of Mary. It is the centre and heart of our Evening Service. All else leads up to it, or expands it, or radiates from it. We mount upwards to it by successive steps; by confession of the sins which disqualify the soul of man for true communion with God; by the great prayer which makes all communion with God easy and natural; by psalms which express the longings of the human heart for some nearer contact with God, or which sadly deplore whatever may hinder it, or which joyfully anticipate its realization. We mount yet a step higher as we listen to some Lesson from the Old Testament, which, whether it be history or prophecy, narrative or moral teaching, poetry or prose, everywhere and always speaks of Jesus Christ, to those who have ears to hear; suggesting Him as the contrast to the human failures, or as the crown of the human excellences which it describes; or announcing Him as

the Heavenly Visitant Who, by-and-by, will still man's fears and warrant his hopes. Now, as of old, unless there be a veil over the heart^a in the reading of the Old Testament, the Great Teacher accompanies us through its pages, and, beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, expounds to us in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.^b And thus we approach the Hymn which proclaims that all for which Psalmists and Prophets have yearned has in very truth and deed come to be. Mary might seem evening by evening to stand in the church of her Divine Son, while in strains which we shall consider, she celebrates an event compared with which all else in human history is insignificant indeed. As from her thankful heart the incense of praise ascends to the Eternal Throne, first in one and then another incense-wreath, each having its own beauty of tint and form, we reflect that the hardest questions of man's mind have been answered, and that the deepest yearnings of his heart have been satisfied. The Only Begotten Son has come down from heaven to be born of a human Mother, to die at the hands of His creatures, and to rise again. After this all else might seem, in some sense must seem, pale and poor; but it is this great truth, set

^a 2 Cor. iii. 14.

^b St. Luke xxiv. 27.

forth or latent in every line of the Magnificat which carries us on to the end of the Evening Service; through the Second Lesson, in which the Incarnate God speaks to us Himself or by the lips of His Apostles; to the Nunc Dimittis, in which we take leave of His message with thankful joy; to the Creed, in which we brace ourselves for the toils and pains of life by a new profession of our faith in Him; to the concluding prayers, in which His omnipotent Intercession is at once the warrant of our praying at all, and of the confidence that we shall be heard, not for our merits, but for His.

It may seem strange that, from time to time, persons who have felt no difficulty about the use of the old Hebrew psalms in Christian worship, have been disposed to take offence at the public use of the Magnificat, or, indeed, of all the Christian hymns which are preserved for us in St. Luke's Gospel. Such a feeling, however, found expression shortly after the Book of Common Prayer had come into use.^a It was maintained that unless we could all be in the exact circumstances of Zacharias at the birth

^a The permission to sing the psalms *Cantate Domino* and *Deus Misereatur*, instead of the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis, dates from 1552. But even this serious concession did not appease the Judaizing temper which was offended by any use of the Evangelical Canticles.

of the Baptist, or of Simeon after seeing our Lord in the Temple, or of Mary at the Visitation, we had no adequate reason for singing their hymns.^a This amounts to saying that no hymn or psalm is to be used by any other person than its composer, unless the circumstances of the composer can be exactly reproduced in the case of the man or the Church which sings his hymn. Not to enquire how this rule would apply to modern and uninspired compositions which are largely in use among us, we may observe that it would forbid any use whatever of the Psalter itself in public or private devotion—a use to which, however, oddly enough, those old objectors who have been referred to, do not seem to have objected. For every psalm was composed in a special set of circumstances, some of which can, while some cannot, be ascertained; and yet it does not seem to have been argued that, because we cannot make these circumstances our own, we are precluded from using the psalms. We are none of us in the position of David persecuted by a jealous sovereign,^b or insulted and rebelled against

^a Cf. Hooker, *Eccl. Pol.*, v. 40. See 1 *Adm. apud Whitg. Def.* 494, quoted by Keble. Some Puritans objected to the frequent use of the *Venite*; cf. *A parte of a register, contayninge sundrie memorable matters*, Edinburgh, 1593, p. 73.

^b Ps. viii., lii., lvii., lviii., lix.

by a favourite son,^a or bringing the ark to the sanctuary of Zion,^b or ordering a royal household according to the Divine Law.^c The glories of Solomon,^d the conquest and humiliation of Rehoboam,^e the repulse of Sennacherib,^f the ruin and desolation of Jerusalem by the Babylonian conqueror,^g the sadness of the captives weeping by the waters of Babylon,^h the laying the corner-stone of the new temple after the exile,ⁱ—these, and many other like subjects or events, are the occasions of psalms, which yet we use at this day to express the fears, or hopes, or resolves, or aspirations of our own souls. Clearly, if such a difference of circumstances does not forbid the recitation of Hebrew psalms, it cannot preclude us from using New Testament hymns; which, as Richard Hooker has said, “concern us so much more than the songs of David, as the Gospel toucheth us more than the Law, the New Testament than the Old.”^j But in truth, whether it be Jewish psalm or Christian hymn, we Christians use them because their inspiration lifts them above the limits of the time, the place, the events which witnessed their composition. As a work of natural genius,

^a Ps. iii.—vii., lv., lxi. ^b *Ib.* xxiv. ^c *Ib.* ci.

^d *Ib.* lxxii. ^e *Ib.* lxxxviii. ^f *Ib.* xlvi., lxxiii., lxxv., lxxvi.

^g *Ib.* cii. ^h *Ib.* cxxxvii. ⁱ *Ib.* cxviii. ^j *Eccl. Pol.*, v. 40, 42.

whether it be poem, or speech, or painting, or statue, has that in it which detaches it from the study of the poet, the audience of the speaker, the workroom of the artist, and makes it belong to all times and countries; so much more do words that are supernaturally inspired carry with them the certificate of an universal applicability, which is independent of places, and events, and epochs, and authorship, and, indeed, of everything save His Mind from Whom they proceed, and that heart and understanding of His creatures which needs and welcomes them.

The Magnificat, then, is the Hymn of the Incarnation. It was uttered in circumstances the like of which had never before, and have never since, surrounded any human being whatever. Mary had been told at Nazareth by a heavenly messenger that she was to be the Mother of Him in Whom all God's best promises to Israel and to the human race were to be fulfilled.* And she was to be His Mother, not in the ordinary way of nature, but, as became His pre-existing glory, and as was needed in order to cut off the entail of evil which came down from the first father of our race, in a new and supernatural way. "The Holy Ghost"—so ran the prediction—"shall come upon thee, and

* St. Luke i. 30-33.

the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee : therefore also that Holy Thing Which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”^a Mary knew that she was to be the Mother of the Divine Messiah, when she traversed the land from Nazareth to a country house some few miles from Jerusalem, on a visit to her cousin Elisabeth, the future mother of the Baptist. It was their meeting which was the immediate occasion of the Magnificat. Elisabeth had no sooner heard from the lips of Mary the wonted salutation, of “Peace be to thee !” with which religious Jews greeted each other after a long absence, than, under the influence of the holy spirit of prophecy which filled her soul, she broke out into words which mark the high significance of Mary’s destiny scarcely less clearly than does Mary’s own Magnificat. “She spake with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me ?”^b The Mother of my Lord ! Elisabeth was the elder woman, and, as the wife of Zacharias, she was in a higher social position than Mary ; but few things in religious history are more beautiful than her ready and unstinted recog-

^a St. Luke i. 35.

^b *Ib.* 42, 43.

dition of the loftier vocation of her younger relative. Her next sentence was at once a blessing and a prophecy ; but they touched a secret spring in the illuminated soul of Mary, and she forthwith uttered her hymn of praise.

She uttered it, as might seem, in a single jet ; but as it passed from her lips, as is usual with eastern poetry, it fell, not of set design, but by an instinct of intrinsic fitness, into divisions of unequal length, which we moderns should call strophes.

Mary begins by offering up to God, with the whole strength and resource of her spiritual being, that praise which she knows to be His due at all times, and especially in view of the signal privilege and honour that has been vouchsafed to her—

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden.”

Then, in a second strophe, she dwells for a moment on the singular and gracious distinction whereby she has been chosen to be the Mother of the Incarnate Son—

“For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me
blessed.

For He That is mighty hath done to me great things ;
And holy is His Name.

And His mercy is on them that fear Him throughout all
generations.”

But during these moments of thankful exultation her vision has widened to embrace new horizons, and, in a third strophe, she sets forth some relations of the Birth of her Son to the action of God's Providence in the history of human nations and human lives—

“He hath showed strength with His Arm ;
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down princes from their thrones,
And hath exalted men of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things ;
And the rich He hath sent empty away.”

Once more, in a concluding strophe, she traces the great gift which, through her, has been bestowed on the race of man, up to its sources in the Compassion and the Faithfulness of God.

“He remembering His Mercy
Hath holpen His servant Israel ;
As He promised to our forefathers,
Abraham and his seed, for ever.”

It has more than once been suggested that such a Hymn as this is not the kind of response which it would be natural for us to make in reply to such a congratulation as Elisabeth's ;^a and it is hinted

^a Strauss, *Leben Jesu*, 1, 3, § 31, cannot understand how two friends, visiting one another, should “even in the midst of the most extraordinary occurrences, break out into long hymns.”

that the composition may be really due to some later writer, whether the Evangelist or another.

Upon this we may remark that "natural" is a term of varying import; and that what is natural to one person, or people, or age, is far from being natural to another. We have only to look around us in order to discover that persons of different temperaments meet similar occasions very differently. One man is reserved and sparing of his words, another is effusive; this man checks his feelings, that man indulges them; one is as literal and prosaic as may be, another almost inevitably expresses himself in the language of poetry. Then the Eastern and Western nations differ now in these respects as they have always differed. To many an Arab at this hour it is perfectly natural to discuss an everyday occurrence in words which have the form and rhythm of a poetical composition. That which an European would put into a sentence, the Arab will expand into what is virtually a poem, with rhythmic rise and fall, and refrains and repetitions, and appeals to all kinds of higher considerations, not perhaps foreign to the subject, but not necessary to its due discussion. No Englishman who had just lost his king and his friend would forthwith break out into an

effusion such as that in which David laments the death of Saul and Jonathan on Mount Gilboa; * but in David, as in many another Eastern, ancient or modern—apart from any question of inspiration—it was almost a matter of course to do so. And Mary, instinct with the spirit of prophecy, answers Elisabeth's congratulations in a burst of inspired poetry, based on older words which she has known from infancy, and which she so transfigures as to make them express the fact which fills her grateful soul with wonder and joy. To measure her utterance by the prosaic rules of our Western temperament, is to forget the most obvious laws of equitable criticism.

Nor, we may confidently add, is there any real ground for the assertion that Mary's Magnificat was the work of any other than Mary. Like the songs of Zacharias and Simeon, it is something more than a psalm, and something less than a complete Christian hymn. A Christian poet, living after the Resurrection of Christ, would surely have said more; a Hebrew psalmist would have said less than Mary. In this Hymn of hers we observe a consciousness of nearness to the fulfilment of the great promises, to which there is

no parallel even in the latest of the psalms ; and yet even Mary does not speak of the Promised One as an Evangelist or an Apostle would have spoken of Him, by His Human Name, and with distinct reference to the mysteries of His Life and Death and Resurrection.^a Her Hymn was a native product of one particular moment of transition in sacred religious history, and of no other ; when the twilight of the ancient dispensation was melting, but had not yet melted, into the full daylight of the new.

Certainly the Magnificat is an inspired Psalm ; it belongs to the highest degree of inspiration, and yet it does not claim an absolute originality. It is, in truth, modelled very largely, although not altogether, on an older Psalm,^b which Hannah had sung many a century before at the door of the tabernacle in Shiloh, when she brought to it her infant son Samuel, as she said, to “lend him to the Lord as long as he liveth.”^c Hannah’s history had an especial place in the heart and thoughts of every Jewish woman. Not only because she was the mother of the great and austere prophet, who may claim in some respects

^a Cf. Mill, *Observations on the Attempted Application of Pantheistic Principles to the Theory and Historic Criticism of the Gospels*, p. 119.

^b 1 Sam. ii. 1-10.

^c *Ib.* i. 28.

an unrivalled importance in the history of the people of Revelation, but also and because her deferred hopes, her bitter disappointments, the rough misunderstanding to which she was exposed even at the hands of the gentle and weak old man who then held the office of high priest in Israel, have a human pathos that is all their own. At last her longings were fulfilled, and when, in accordance with the terms of her vow, she consecrated her son as a Nazarite to the lifelong service of God, her thankful heart found vent in a Hymn of Praise, in repeating which many a Jewish mother and maiden from that time forth associated herself with the sorrows and the joys of Hannah. Listen to Hannah first and then to Mary, and you will perceive how closely their hymns are related to each other. Each of these inspired women finds her joy in God ;^a each traces God's Hand in the exaltation of the humble and in the humiliation of the proud ;^b each closes her song by dwelling on God's fulfilment of His promises.^c Mary, we see plainly, has reproduced the very ideas, the order of ideas, nay, sometimes the very phrases, of the older hymn ; but she has made them subservient to a truth which was seen, if at all, very

^a 1 Sam. ii. 1.^b *Ib.* 6-8.^c *Ib.* 10.

dimly, across the ages, by the older songstress, and which is close and clear to herself. When Strauss observes that if the Virgin's Hymn had been inspired from on high we might expect in it more of originality,^a it is not out of place to reflect that God the Holy Ghost is not bound to adopt the exact standard of originality which may approve itself to a modern literary man of a sceptical turn of mind. Originality does not consist always and only in the production of new material, new thoughts, new phrases; the truest originality may display itself when old ideas and old phrases are enlisted in the service of some newly proclaimed truth. When, in her inspired Magnificat, Mary draws so largely upon the ancient Hymn of Hannah, she is only doing what inspired souls had done again and again before her. We cannot read the Bible carefully, without noting how Psalmist borrows from Psalmist, Prophet from Prophet, nay, it even might seem, one Evangelist from another; the first object with all the sacred writers being not the creation or the vindication of a poor repu-

^a *Leben Jesu, u.s.* Strauss thinks it "surprising that a discourse emanating immediately from the Divine Source of inspiration should not be more striking for its originality, but should be interlarded with reminiscences from the Old Testament."

tation for one species of originality, but the clear exhibition of truth through the employment of those precise words and thoughts which are best able to do it justice.

II.

The first strophe of Mary's Hymn is a burst of praise. And we may note here three matters for consideration.

1. There is, to begin with, the fact that in the order of Mary's thoughts the praise of God comes first. To give God His due is not, with Mary, an afterthought; it is not appended to something relating to her friends or to herself. In Mary's soul God takes precedence of all besides. And therefore, in her Hymn, the praise of God takes the lead of all other topics. This, be it observed, is the case, although her Hymn is also an answer to the congratulations of a near relative. She is replying to Elizabeth, but she instinctively, inevitably, turns the eye of her soul upwards. She addresses her first words to God.

Now let us consider what would, in all probability, have been our own course of procedure.

You have achieved, let us suppose, some consi-

derable success, or you have escaped some disaster, or some position or distinction has been conferred on you. Friends surround you with congratulations; some of them conventional and perfunctory; many of them, let us be assured, sincere. Your friends paraphrase, after an earthly fashion, the words of Elisabeth to Mary. They tell you that your success, your escape, your distinction, is a gain and a joy to them. They associate themselves, by the expression of a warm and intimate sympathy, with your satisfaction and delight; they are honoured, they are decorated, they have succeeded and been distinguished, because you, their friend, have won distinction and success.

How do you reply? You begin by thanking them for their kindness. To succeed in a world where no friends are left to express their joy, would be success robbed of two-thirds of its value. The old sometimes observe, pathetically, that success and honours have come to them too late. And so you tell your friends with perfect sincerity that their congratulations are more precious to you than anything that has been done by or done to yourself, and that your first thought on this auspicious occasion is the satisfaction which you have given them. The first verse of your

real Magnificat, if it were written out, might perhaps run thus: "My soul doth magnify the kindness and sympathy of my friends, and my spirit hath rejoiced in the pleasure which they have enjoyed on my account."

Or, it may be, you give your first thoughts to yourself. You do not wish to say too much about yourself, but at the same time you will not affect a false modesty. You cannot deny—that is the form which a sense of personal merit takes when tempered with some misgivings as to the wisdom of expressing it—you cannot deny that it is a great satisfaction to you that efforts, long persevered in without success, have at last succeeded; that merits, which it might have seemed were entirely overlooked, have at last been recognized. You do not wish to dwell too much on the subject; but, on the other hand, your conviction of what is the fact, and what you call a "proper pride," compels you to say thus much. With this view you would make the first verse of your Magnificat something of this sort: "My soul doth magnify myself, and my spirit hath rejoiced in the efforts or merits which have at length been rewarded as they deserve."

But you are a Christian, or at least a Theist. You remember that, after all, there is such a Being

as God. If the truth is to be told, you do not feel Him to be very near to you, but you do not wish to forget Him altogether. If He exists,—and you believe that He does exist,—He must have something to do with everything that goes on. It is only right that you should recognize this. You recognize it somewhat tardily, and as a matter to be touched on lightly; because, in fact, God is less real to you than you are to yourself, or than your friends are. You would not ignore God; still less would you deny His existence. But you think of Him, in many of your moods of mind, as an idea or conception rather than as a living Being; a conception from which man's mind can really subtract something, or to which it can add something, as the ages pass. You do not think of Him as of One Who is entirely independent of you, but Who is also as near to you as are the influences which you can measure and the creatures which you can touch, about which you talk to other men, or of which you read in the newspapers. He is there; but on a somewhat distant and dim horizon of your thought. He is there, and something must be said about Him; but that something must befit your very thin and precarious idea of what He is. And so at last, you say your

Magnificat after a third fashion: "A sense of intellectual fitness leads me to magnify the Lord; and I experience a satisfaction in admitting that now, as at other times, something may be due to a higher Power than myself."

How pathetically is all this in contrast with Mary! No doubt, to Mary, the joy of Elizabeth was a real joy; and she cannot but have known that by lineage and training she herself had been prepared for her own high destiny. But her first thought is of Him from Whose goodness all else proceeds; both the warm hearts, and kindness of friends, and the gifts, whether of nature or of grace, which she had herself received. God must claim her first acknowledgments. Before Him she is as nothing; and yet He, in His condescending Mercy, had deigned to visit her, as none of His creatures had been visited before. She can only think of the contrast between her nothingness and His Magnificence. If she glances for a moment at herself, it is to wonder that she should have been noticed at all by her Creator. "He hath regarded"—not the humility, not the lowly temper; these graces were undoubtedly hers in a very eminent degree, but she is not thinking of them; the original word will not lend itself to such a sense.—"He hath regarded

the low condition * of His handmaiden." Because the contrast between Him and herself is thus present to her; because she is convinced that she has exerted no claim on Him, and that whatever she has received has come from Him; she must begin with praise—

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”

2. Then Mary praises God with all the faculties and resources of her spiritual being. “My soul doth magnify,” “my spirit hath rejoiced.” “Soul” and “spirit” are not two different names for the same thing. When St. Paul prays that the “whole spirit and soul and body of the Thessalonian Christians may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,”^b he does not use two words where one would have sufficed. No doubt, alike in Biblical and popular language, both soul and spirit are sometimes used alone for the whole immaterial part of man; as when our Lord asks, “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain

* ταπείνωσι. The word may have been chosen to express among other things the reduced circumstances of the House of David. Meyer, *in loc.*, takes it more generally: “Maria meint die Niedrigkeit ihrer Person.”

^b 1 Thess. v. 23.

the whole world, and lose his own soul?"^a or when the Preacher says "that the spirit shall return to God Who gave it."^b But when, as here, the words occur together, in more or less obvious contrast with each other, they stand for the lower and higher parts of that invisible half of man which accompanies his body, yet is distinct from it.^c Soul is nearer to the bodily nature; spirit nearer to the nature of God. Soul in man is analogous to the higher life of the animals; the animals have in them nothing that corresponds to spirit. Soul receives impressions both from the external world and from spirit: and so, as here, it utters through the bodily organs that thought or emotion which has previously^d been present to spirit. Soul is the seat of passion, of imagination, of impulse; spirit, while, as we see in this Hymn, it is, like pure thought, capable of sublime joys all its own, is specially the seat of the self-measuring and reflective reason, of memory, of deliberate and imperative will. Soul, it is plain, lives not far from the frontier of the things of time and sense; spirit

^a St. Mark viii. 36.

^b Eccles. xii. 7.

^c Delitzsch, *Bibl. Psychol.*, p. 179.

^d Observe the present *μεγαλύνει* to express the action of *ψυχῆς*, in contrast with the aorist, *ἡγαλλίασεν*, which describes that of *πνεῦμα*. Cf. Meyer, *in loc.*

belongs to a sphere on which the things of time and sense need not, and often do not, intrude. Between them soul and spirit include the whole incorporeal nature of man, with all its powers; and Mary summons them all, the highest and the lowest, the faculties which traverse the world of sense, and the faculties which live among the highest and most abstract truths, to the solemn work of praise. Her "soul" must magnify the Lord, because, as she sings, her "spirit" has rejoiced in God her Saviour.

Is there not here also a lesson to be learnt from Mary? Some men appear to think that a single power of the soul may be told off, like a domestic servant or a soldier, when sent on a particular errand, to discharge the duty of praise. One man bids his fancy engage in the work; and another his affections; and another his reasoned sense of the fitness of things; and another his instinct of beauty, turned towards the higher horizons. Nay! it might sometimes seem as though no mental or spiritual faculty was bidden to engage in praise at all; and Christians who make a serious effort to pray, and would be shocked at the neglect to do so, leave the duty of praising the great Creator to their neighbours, to the choir, to the choristers, or, it might almost

seem, to the organ. And yet what a demand on all the faculties of our being is made by one simple and oft-repeated act of praise, such as, for instance, the Gloria Patri! We say it before we begin the Psalms; we repeat it at the end of each Psalm and each Canticle, excepting the Te Deum. It consists only of two verses, and yet what infinite spheres does it bid us traverse! Our souls rise first to the Three Almighty Incomprehensible Subsistences within the Being of the Godhead—"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost." And then, remembering that the Eternal Three have ever been and ever will be what They are, our thought reaches backwards into an unbegun, and forwards into an unending eternity, while seeking for an instant to touch the present, which, as we touch it, has already mingled with the past—"As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end." If any of us should have cause to think that we have paid but scant attention and embarked little or no spiritual effort in this oft-repeated act of praise, let us bethink ourselves of the import of Mary's words. She would summon the whole mental and moral nature to the work of praise; a work in which, as in a vast orchestra, each mental faculty has its place, and

may bring its due and needed contribution to swell the harmony of the mighty whole. No variety of emotion is so poor and lowly that it cannot utter something in honour of the Creator; no power or resource of thought is so great that it is humbled by joining in the tribute which is due from all finite minds to the Infinite. The old exhortation to the Temple choir may be paraphrased as addressed to the faculties of the Christian soul—

“Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet,
 Praise Him upon the lute and harp.
 Praise Him in the cymbals and dances:
 Praise Him upon the strings and pipe.
 Praise Him upon the well-tuned cymbals:
 Praise Him upon the loud cymbals.
 Let everything that hath breath
 Praise the Lord.”^a

3. Lastly, observe the title under which Mary praises God. “My Saviour.” “My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”

This designation, as you would know, although associated by Christian faith, in an especial manner, with our Lord Jesus Christ, is much older than the New Testament. It grew naturally out of Israel’s faith in God’s especial and protecting Providence. “It is Thou that savest us from our enemies,”^b was the voice of the chosen people from age to age.

^a Ps. cl. 3-6.

^b Ps. xliv. 8.

But the enemies were generally political foes, and the salvation was victory in the field or deliverance from bondage. This outward and temporal salvation was, indeed, also a religious salvation. Israel was the people of God; the defeat of Israel was the defeat of the cause of God; the victory or salvation of Israel was the victory or the triumph of that cause. But it is probable that a new impulse was given to this more spiritual meaning by what would have seemed to pious Jews the profane assumption of the title of Saviour by the pagan kings, who, after the death of Alexander the Great, founded dynasties in Syria and in Egypt.^a If henceforth the God of Israel was to be addressed as Saviour, it must be in a lofty and spiritual sense; and thus Mary praises God as the Saviour, not of her country from temporal ruin, but of her own soul from eternal death. The expression cannot be explained by the clause, "He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden;" which, while it assigns the motive for Mary's praise, does not explain the title she gives to God. The honour put on her by the Incarnation might be described by many other names. But high office is one thing, personal

^a Antiochus I., of Syria, the son of Seleucus Nicanor, took the title of *σωτήρ*, after his victory over the Gauls. It was also assumed in Egypt, by Ptolemy I., the son of Lagus.

salvation another; and if Mary calls God her Saviour, it is for reasons independent of the rank and duties which He has assigned to her.

Let us reflect on the meaning of this expression on Mary's lips. Unique as was her office, magnificent as was the endowment of grace bestowed on her, singular as were her humility, her purity, her likeness to the Most Holy, she has and she needs a Saviour. She does not stand outside that universal law, that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."^a Hers is not a soul which finds its way to the courts of heaven without recourse to that One "Name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."^b There is, in fact, no intermediate position in the kingdom of grace between the Saviour and the saved; no neutral post, in which nothing is received and from which nothing is bestowed. There is one Saviour, and all others are simply saved, be their place in the spheres of glory what it may, and whatever the graces that may have been here bestowed on them. Mary owed, and owes what she was on earth, what she is in heaven, no less entirely to the merits and the Precious Blood of her Divine Son, than does the humblest Christian among us at this hour; and she

^a Rom. iii. 23.

^b Acts iv. 12.

offers the best praises that her soul can offer to God, not as manifested first or only in the awful attributes of Knowledge or Power, but as her Saviour.

And in this, too, most assuredly she is a model for us. It is well indeed that we should think deeply and often on other aspects of the Divine Nature, each one of which is a fitting object of adoring praise. It is meet and right that we should give thanks to God for the great glory of His Power, His Intelligence, His Love. But the sense of natural gratitude which He has put in our hearts bids us remember that "God commendeth His love to us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."^a There is much else for which we may praise God; we must bless Him "for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life." But if we know what indeed we are, and what has been done and may yet be done for us, we shall do more than thank Him for these fruits of His bounty. We shall bless Him, above all, for His "inestimable love in the Redemption of the world through our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory," which, through that Redemption, He has bestowed on us.

^a Rom. v. 8.

II.

PRIVILEGES OF THE VIRGIN MOTHER.

ST. LUKE I. 48-50.

*For behold, from henceforth
All generations shall call me blessed.
For He That is mighty
Hath done to me great things.
And holy is His Name :
And His mercy is on them that fear Him
Unto all generations.*

LAST Sunday we left Mary, at the end of the first strophe of her Hymn, beginning to disclose the motive that had inspired the burst of praise with which she had replied to the salutation of Elisabeth. All the powers of her spiritual nature, ranging from the heights of pure thought to the depths of passionate emotion, were engaged, like the variously accomplished members of a great choir, in chanting the glory of the Eternal Being; especially in His character of the Saviour of herself and of the whole race of mankind. But the fact which immediately prompts her song is that He, in Whose sight every

creature is manifest,^a and Whose eyes are in every place, beholding the evil and the good,^b has deigned to cast on her a look of profound significance. "He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden." The blood of David flows in her veins. But for some generations the royal race has lived in seclusion, among the poor; cherishing the secret of its high descent, but resigning itself to the destiny which God, in His Justice and His Love, had for the time assigned to it. The low social estate of Mary was, in her eyes, associated with a low spiritual estate; a condition which could pretend to no excellence or merit in the eyes of God. Nevertheless, He had "looked upon her," after such a fashion, that she must needs break out into thankfulness and praise. It may be that her memory was haunted by some words of a later Psalmist, describing an event which, like the Annunciation, though in an immeasurably lower sense, was the reversal of a great humiliation.

"He taketh the simple out of the dust,
And lifteth the poor out of the mire;
That He may set him with the princes,
Even with the princes of His people."^c

She thinks of herself as of the handmaiden, or,

^a Heb. iv. 13.

^b Prov. xv. 3.

^c Ps. cxiii. 6, 7.

more exactly, the bondwoman^a of God; a slave who was simply His property, who could plead no personal rights in arrest of His Will. And yet what had He not done for her? Before she goes further she must, out of sheer gratitude, own His bounty; and this she does in the second strophe of her Hymn, in which one remarkable result of the high honour conferred on her, the Source to which it is due, and the sense in which a kindred distinction may be shared by all the true servants of God, are successively touched on.

“For behold, from henceforth
 All generations shall call me blessed.
 For He That is mighty
 Hath done to me great things;
 And holy is His Name.
 And His mercy is on them that fear Him
 Throughout all generations.”

I.

Mary places her finger first of all on one very startling consequence of the honour assigned to her as Mother of the Divine Redeemer.^b She would

^a δούλης.

^b It is not easy with Meyer to paraphrase ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν by “nach den begeisterten Worten der Elisabeth.” The fact which Elisabeth recognized by the words ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ Κυρίου μου gave her address its real importance.

live for ever in the memory of mankind. Elisabeth had said, "Blessed art thou among women;" and Mary, so far from deprecating this high estimate of her privilege, goes considerably beyond it. "Behold," she exclaims, "from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed."

Undoubtedly there are in the Hebrew Scriptures sentences which Mary, when thus speaking, may have had in her mind. Thus, at the birth of Asher, his mother Leah exclaimed, "Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed;"^a and the child's name Asher, "the happy," expresses the feeling of his mother. And in the Book of Proverbs the children of the virtuous woman arise up and call her blessed;^b and Malachi predicts a day when all nations would recognize the blessedness of Israel as having been the people of God.^c But there is nothing in these sayings which is really comparable to Mary's unique prophecy about herself; in which she anticipates the judgment, not of some, but of all the generations of living men. "All generations shall call me blessed."

That which, at first sight, must strike us in this language is its boldness. Mary is sure of that

^a Gen. xxx. 13.

^b Prov. xxxi. 28.

^c Mal. iii. 12. See Dr. Pusey, *in loc.*: *Minor Prophets*.

which, in ordinary experience, seems to lie beyond the range of probable conjecture. She is sure of the future. Average human common sense, looking out upon the future, declares that nothing is probable except the unforeseen. But Mary, too, surveys the future, and she has no hesitation in foretelling the terms in which distant ages will speak of herself. "Behold," she cries, "from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed."

She is sure, first of all, that she will be remembered. Let us reflect what this means. In every generation of men, only a small minority of the dead is remembered at all. A name commonly lives in a family for two or three generations at most. If a man is known to a wider circle, it may cherish his memory for a few years. But the circle dies, and the man is forgotten. There are, of course, some few memories that survive: rulers of peoples, leaders of political parties, discoverers in art or science, masters in literature. But you can almost count them on your fingers; and their names, too, when a century has gone by, are often enough on their way to pass into general oblivion, even though they should linger in the notebooks of students and on the shelves of libraries. As a rule, all quickly disappear. A

human life drops like a pebble into the ocean of Eternity ; for a few moments there are ripples on the surface, growing fainter as the circles widen, and then, so far as this world is concerned, the life which has passed from sight is as forgotten as though it had never been lived.

“ Men fade like leaves, they drop away
Beneath the forest shade :
Others again succeed ; but they
Are in oblivion laid.’
So spake the sire of Grecian song ;
Through each succeeding age,
The words are caught and borne along
By poet, saint, and sage.”^a

This, I say, is the rule ; but Mary is confident that she will be an exception to it. She is, to all seeming, but a poor Syrian peasant-girl. And yet she dares to predict that this ordinary law of forgetfulness of the dead will be suspended in her favour. Remember that, as yet, nothing has happened outwardly to warrant her confidence. No Apostle has yet been called to the service of her Son ; no miracle has been worked by Him ; no one has yet heard of His Resurrection or of His Sermon on the Mount ; nay, He is still invisible ; He has scarcely laid aside the glory which He had ^b with the Father before the

^a Williams, *Christian Scholar*, p. 23.

St. John xvii. 5.

world was ; He has not yet entered by birth into the world of sense. Mary has only the angel's promise to fall back upon. Yet she sees in it a warrant that she will live in the memories of men to the furthest limits of time.

But Mary not only knows that she will be always remembered ; she declares that she will be congratulated on her blessedness as long as her memory shall endure among men.

Let us reflect here, that when a memory does survive, it often survives only to be associated with a very different judgment from that which was once accorded to it. A time comes when all who knew a living man or woman have passed away ; when the dead can only be studied in documents, in such documents as may be still procurable. And then a reputation is forthwith cast into the crucible of criticism, which constantly, under the guise of historical impartiality, ministers to the passions or to the prejudices of the age. Criticism, indeed, is sometimes just ; it destroys unworthy idols, and it redresses the injustice of contemporaries. But it is a very uncertain guide to absolute truth ; and it often illustrates by its capricious activity the point on which I am insisting ; it shows how transient may be an earthly reputation. Scarcely any two writers

who have discussed him, during the seventy years that have passed since his death, have agreed as to the merits or demerits of the first Napoleon. And if, to come nearer to our present subject, we recall the names of women who have figured on the scene of human history—Hatapsu, Semiramis, Zenobia, the Countess Matilda, Catharine of Medici, Elizabeth of England, Mary Stuart, Maria Theresa, Catharine II.—how various have been the world's judgments about them! But of such a vacillation respecting herself Mary has no apprehension whatever. Filled with the spirit of prophecy, she looks down the long procession of the coming ages, with their incessant vicissitudes of races and opinions, and she knows that her name will ever carry with it associations which must secure for it a universal welcome. "From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed."

And is she not right? Nearly nineteen centuries have passed since she spoke; and what man of average information, interested only in the concerns which affect our race, has not heard of the Virgin Mary? A man cannot help hearing of her; so conspicuously does she loom in the pages of human history. True enough it is that around the solid records in the Gospels respecting her, religious imagination has been especially busy.

Early in the history of Christendom there were documents,^a which the early Church rejected as apocryphal,^b and in which Mary's birth and infancy, and the exceptional distinctions supposed to have been accorded to her after her death, are described with a freedom which might have passed as poetry if only it had not been treated as sacred prose. Into this subject it is not consistent with our present purpose to enter. Suffice it to say, that whatever the exaggerations and fables which have thus gathered around the name of Mary, they cannot obscure the greatness which is assigned to her in the pages of the Gospel, while in their wildest forms they should remind us of the place which she herself claimed to occupy, and has occupied ever since her death, in the minds of men.

Compare Mary, from this point of view, with some of the great ladies who were nearly or exactly her contemporaries. While Mary was fetching water day by day from the well of Nazareth, or gathering

^a For the *Pseudo-Matthæi Evangelium*, and the *Evangelium de Nativitate Mariæ*, cf. Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha*, pp. 50-114. For the *Κοίμησις τῆς ἁγίας Θεοτόκου*, and the two versions of the *Transitus Mariæ*, cf. Tischendorf, *Apocalypses Apocryphæ*, pp. 95-136.

^b Cf. S. Hieron., *Contr. Helvid.* cxii., ad Matt. xxv. 35-sqq.; Credner, *Gesch. d. Canons*, 215-217; Tisch., *Ev. Ap.*, Prol. xxv.-xxvii.; and *Apocalypses Apocryph.*, Prol. xxxiv.-xlvi.

wood and wild fruits on the hill above the village, these stately dames, surrounded by a crowd of slaves, swept proudly through the halls of the Cæsars. But, if we except a professed student of history here or there, what do men know about them now? What do you know of Livia, who parted from an honourable husband that she might be the wife of Augustus; or of Julia, the ill-used daughter of Augustus and wife of Tiberius; or of Octavia, the sister of Augustus, whom Antony divorced that he might wed Cleopatra; or of Antonia, the high-minded daughter of Octavia, who lived, they say, to be poisoned by her grandson Caligula; or—somewhat later—of such empresses as Messalina, Agrippina, Poppœa,—better perhaps unmentioned in a Christian church—who are associated with the courts of Claudius and Nero? The names of these ladies were once as familiar to the vast population of the Empire as are those of the members of our own royal family to ourselves. For a few years they filled the thoughts, and—by their crimes or their misfortunes—they supplied materials for the gossip, of the world. Now they are, for all practical purposes, forgotten; while the lowly maiden who was living unknown in a remote province of the vast Empire that was ruled by their nearest

relatives, is at this hour more borne in mind by civilized men than any other member of her sex who ever lived.

II.

But what is the justification of this astonishing confidence on the part of Mary that she will be remembered as blessed to the utmost limits of time? It is not anything that she has personally achieved. It is not any grace or excellence peculiar to her mind or character. That she was personally endowed with graces of the highest excellence and beauty we may be well assured: in coming among us, the Eternal Son would, by His Spirit, make ready a fitting temple prepared for Himself. But Mary dwells on nothing of this kind; on nothing personal to herself. She only knows that she has been the recipient of an astonishing privilege, conferred on her by the free bounty of her Creator.

“He That is mighty hath done to me great things;
And holy is His Name.”

She refers, of course, to what was implied in the message of the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation: “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. . . .

Fear not, Mary : for thou hast found favour with God. . . . Thou shalt bring forth a Son, and shalt call His Name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest : and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David : and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever ; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.”^a

And in answer to Mary’s expression of wonder the Angel added, “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee : therefore also that Holy Thing Which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”^b Mary had received these assurances in submissive faith. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord ; be it unto me according to thy word.”^c And they were the warrant of the confidence which she expresses, that “all generations shall call me blessed.” How, indeed, could it be otherwise, if she was to be the Mother of the superhuman Heir of David’s throne and promises ? if He Who was to be born of her was, in virtue of the supernatural conditions of His Birth, to be recognized as the Son of God ? Nothing that she had done or could have done, nothing that she was or could have been, could have merited this extraordinary distinction ; and Mary is bent upon

^a St. Luke i. 28-33.

^b *Ib.* i. 35.

^c *Ib.* i. 38.

ascribing it unreservedly to God. "He That is Mighty hath done great things to me."

Be careful to observe that Mary dwells here, not on her person, but on her office in the economy of the Incarnation. Not once in the Magnificat does she let fall a single word which points to a sense of personal desert or excellence; her joy is that "He That is Mighty hath done great things to me." And she adds, "Holy is His Name." She does not understand why she should have been singled out for such high honour; but she is sure that, since He wills it, all is well. For His Name, which is to her apprehension inseparable from, since it unveils His Nature, is Holy. Holiness is the rule and measure of that which He ordains. Elisabeth had wondered, "Whence is this to me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?" Mary does not repudiate the honour; to have done so would have been to make little of God's bounty. But she insists that she is whatever she is by the grace and favour of God, and in this respect is on a level with all His creatures.

In all this is she not an example to an age like ours, which has no very robust faith in the Presence and the gifts of God, but does pay exceptional homage to the merits or accomplishments of indi-

vidual men? Even the modern Church of Christ has not wholly escaped the disposition to think less of a sacred office than of the man who holds it; to dwell lightly on the gift or the commission which is common to the holder with all his brethren, and to devote exceptional attention to anything that is strictly peculiar to the man, and that may be supposed to be the product of his own industry or character. It may well be that we of the clergy have not always been sufficiently on our guard against a tendency to disparage the ministerial character which Christ has given us in comparison with some fancied or real endowments which we dream of as our own. Any such mistake is tacitly rebuked by Mary in her Magnificat. She never leads us to think of what she personally is; but we do not for a moment forget that she is by office the Mother of the Divine Redeemer.

Indeed, when we review the terms in which she refers to her surpassing privilege, it is impossible not to be struck with their guarded and reserved tone. "He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden;" "He That is mighty hath done to me great things." We wonder, perhaps, that she is not more explicit; that, knowing what she knows of her extraordinary place in the order of

Divine Providence, she does not say more about it; does not, at least in outline, describe what it is. "He That is mighty hath done to me great things." An ordinary Christian might say as much, we think, after recovering from a dangerous illness, or after a spiritual change, which had altered profoundly all his views and purposes in life. Mary is designated as Mother of the Eternal Son; she is, as the poet says with literal truth, "favoured beyond archangel's dream;"^a and yet she might seem to desire to draw a veil over her prerogatives, by phrases which, while implying, in her mouth, something extraordinary, convey no definite idea of what it is. Can we venture in any way to account for this?

It would seem, then, that here Mary is teaching us a lesson which has never been unneeded since religion—the commerce between the human soul and God—has had a place in the life of man. She is teaching us the duty of speaking very sparingly, if we speak at all, of any blessings which we may have reason to believe that God has conferred on us and on no others. It cannot be wrong to insist on the common facts of Christian experience. We cannot be mistaken, when a good opportunity

^a *Christian Year*, Hymn for the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

offers, in pointing out the power of prayer, the value of Christian example, the instruction and encouragement to be gained from Holy Scripture, the grace and efficacy of the Christian Sacraments. We cannot err in bearing our witness to truths which are the common inheritance of Christians; the reality of His love for us, Who died for us on the Cross, and intercedes for us on His throne in heaven; the incalculable issues of life; the certainty and nearness of the eternal world. To say what we may with sincerity and reverence on these high subjects is indeed to

“Praise God in His holiness,
 Praise Him in the firmament of His power,
 Praise Him in His noble acts,
 Praise Him according to His excellent greatness.”^a

But when we come to matters which touch us, and us alone; to blessings which we only have received; to experiences which, so far as we know, have been shared by no others;—the case is different. As to these, the best rule is to say nothing at all about them, if we can help it; or, if we must say something, to say as little as possible.

That God does at times visit one particular soul as He visits no other, can hardly be doubted. The

^a Ps. cl. 1, 2.

Bible teaches us that He does so in a variety of ways ; and here Christian experience has ever been in accord with the mind of Holy Scripture. Such favours or gifts to individuals are suited to the needs or the temperament of those who receive them ; they cannot be catalogued or reduced to a system. Sometimes God gives to a soul a peculiar satisfaction and joy in prayer ; sometimes a vivid sense of His Presence in times of anxiety or trouble ; sometimes a clear presentiment of the blessedness of the world to come. There is no question here of communications made, whether in prayer or otherwise, to a single soul for the sake of others ; as when, during that stormy night in the Mediterranean, the angel of the Lord stood by Paul, and assured him of the safety of himself and his fellow-voyagers.^a But much may pass between God and a soul which has no reference to others ; as when our Lord encouraged and guided the Apostle in the vision at Corinth,^b or strengthened him during the second imprisonment at Rome.^c Such things may take place in any Christian life. There is no reason for doubting the reality of these special favours, but there is great reason why those who have received, or who think that they have received them should

^a Acts xxvii. 24.

^b *Ib.* xviii. 9, 10.

^c 2 Tim. iv. 17.

say as little about them as they may. For, first, there is always the possibility that what looks like a spiritual visit, endowment, or grace, especially if it be of an unusual character, may be in truth an illusion of natural emotion. That such illusions exist is no less certain than the existence of the spiritual graces or gifts which they counterfeit. And, next, supposing there to be no element of illusion at all, a soul cannot but suffer loss if, like Hezekiah, when entertaining the messengers of Merodach-Baladan, it displays its treasures in an ostentatious temper;^a and the danger of such ostentation is very subtle, and may exist where it is least suspected. Then, thirdly, there is the ever-present risk of exaggeration; not in the coarse form of representing something to have occurred which never did occur at all, but in the more common forms of giving distinctness and outline to that which was indefinite, or colour when everything was colourless, or vividness and point where such elements of interest were really wanting.

Probably we have all heard of meetings of earnest people, in which first one and then another member of the company has retailed his experiences. If these experiences were strictly confined to sins,

^a 2 Kings xx. 12-18; Isa. xxxix. 1-7.

such meetings might be very improving. In the early Church of Christ, Christians confessed their sins in public; and such confession, it need hardly be said, was a very good lesson in the difficult work of learning to be really sincere and humble. But to talk in public about any tokens of God's especial favour towards us, or still more about our good points, even if our estimate of them is an accurate one, is surely very dangerous; dangerous to those graces of truthfulness and self-forgetfulness which are, in the Christian life, of almost more account than anything else. I do not say that no occasion can ever arise to justify departure from this rule; one such occasion, we know, did present itself in the lifetime of St. Paul. He had been traduced by his opponents at Corinth, as an ambitious, scheming, and, above all, unspiritual man; who was really working against Christ's older Apostles, Peter and James, and who acted as he did because, unlike Peter, he had never witnessed such a sight as the Transfiguration—the vision of Christ in glory. Had his own reputation or comfort only been at stake, the Apostle would have been silent. But, if his opponents were unanswered, his whole work for Jesus Christ at Corinth would have been imperilled. And therefore very reluctantly he

partially, only partially, withdraws the veil from an occurrence of which, but for the ill-natured gossip of the Corinthian sectaries, we should never have heard. In doing this he only half admits that he is the subject of his own narrative; he refers to the receiver of the singular distinction which he records as if he were or might be some one other than himself.

“I knew a man in Christ fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) how that he was caught up into Paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.”^a

We see how a reference to this striking passage in his life was wrung out the soul of the unwilling Apostle by the sheer pressure of spiritual necessity; and something of the same kind must have been the case with the Blessed Virgin, when for the honour of her Son, and to promote the true and full knowledge of the Gospel, she communicated

^a 2 Cor. xii. 2-5.

to the Evangelist St. Luke the details of all that passed at the Annunciation between herself and the angel. When she is acknowledging Elisabeth's congratulations, she is under no such necessity; and therefore she veils what has happened beneath the more general phrases of the Magnificat. It is a point of spiritual prudence to know how to say enough to give God His due, and yet not enough to feed that subtle self-approbation which is one of the worst foes of our true well-being.

III.

Mary concludes the second strophe of her Hymn by lines which lead our thoughts away from God's dealings with herself, to a general law of His Providence—

"His mercy is on them that fear Him
Unto all generations."

And yet in these words she may well be classing herself among those who fear God, and whom God, in consequence, visits with His mercy, whatever form the visitation may take. By "fear" she means that sincere and awe-struck apprehension of the Presence and Majesty of God which is the beginning of all spiritual wisdom, since without it

the soul can take no true measure either of itself, or of what is due to the Author and End of its existence. Such fear may coexist with love; although love in such degree as it becomes "perfect"^a expels from fear the element of terror, while preserving that of reverent and watchful apprehension. It is in this sense that "perfect love casteth out fear." Fear and love are the twin guardians of the higher life of the soul; and God never fails to help and govern those whom He brings up in His steadfast fear and love.^b

Mary, then, shows, by what took place at the Annunciation, that she had this fear, or reverent apprehension of God, in her heart; that she was looking out for intimations of His Will. And, accordingly, His mercy lighted upon her; He made her the Mother of His Son. But the same law of His action would hold good for all coming time. Not by natural works of righteousness which man had done, but according to His mercy,^c would Jesus Christ save men from their sins; and this mercy would be accorded to those who had in their hearts that sensitiveness to what was amiss in them which some apprehension of what God is alone can give.

^a 1 St. John iv. 18.

^b Collect for Second Sunday after Trinity. ^c Tit. iii. 5.

So it was with those earliest believers who waited for the Consolation of Israel ;^a so it has been with every soul which has come, in adult life, out of the darkness of heathenism or unbelief to the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. To the end of time Jesus is the channel and dispenser to the human race of the infinite Mercy of God, and He dispenses it to those seekers who begin with fear.

But Mary's words have another and a deeper meaning. It is that for the endless well-being of the soul those earliest stirrings of life which are due to a Divine influence, and which we call fear and love, are more important even than religious privileges. They are more important, not in themselves, but to us. Without fear and love the greatest religious privileges are but as seed dropped into the sand of the desert,—they cannot bear fruit, or indeed do anything for us. We may dare to say that even to Mary it was more necessary that she should have the fear of God in her heart than that she should be the Mother of the Incarnate Son ; since our Lord Himself has told us so. You remember that striking scene in after-years, when one in a crowd of eager listeners around Him, in a transport of enthusiasm, essayed to win His heart by reference

^a St. Luke ii. 25.

to the blessedness of His Mother: "Blessed is the womb that bare Thee, and the paps that Thou hast sucked." ^a What was His answer? He does not disparage, much less deny, the high standing and privilege of His Mother Mary; but He insists that both for her and for all others the more important thing is that temper of obedient fear, which alone makes great religious privileges other than dangerous. "Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it." He does not here imply that His Mother did not satisfy this condition of true blessedness; we are told, indeed, that she kept in view all God's providential dealings towards her, and pondered them in her heart. ^b But He would draw attention away from religious privilege, however eminent, to those vital conditions without which no spiritual advantages can be turned to good account.

We can never afford to lose sight of this truth. The human mind is constantly tempted to think that the possession of high religious office, or of special religious opportunities, is of itself a warrant of religious security in time and for eternity. Nothing is less true. A man may be an Apostle, and yet a Judas. He may be a companion of

^a St. Luke xi. 28.

^b *Ib.* ii. 19.

apostles, and yet a Demas. He may be a receiver of that greatest of all the gifts of God—that gift by receiving which we are most nearly likened to Mary—the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood—and yet he may eat and drink his own condemnation, not discerning the Lord's Body.^a Warm or excited feelings are often full of illusion, but the important matter is that sensitiveness of conscience to the Will and the Presence of God which the Bible calls "fear." "Blessed is the man that feareth the Lord; he hath great delight in His commandments;"^b "Blessed are all they that fear the Lord, and walk in His ways. For thou shalt eat the labours of thine hands: O well is thee, and happy shalt thou be."^c

And thus we are led to reflect—even in presence of the highest religious distinction that ever was conferred on a human being—that, after all, religion places all men on a level more truly than any other force or agency in this world. The great inequalities between human lives are due to causes which are rooted in the nature of things and always operative; if these inequalities could be suppressed by legal enactment to-morrow, they would reappear in a week's time. The rich and poor, the powerful and

^a 1 Cor. xi. 20.

^b Ps. cxii. 1.

^c *Ib.* cxxviii. 1, 2.

the defenceless, the honoured and the neglected, will ever be found in human society, for the simple reason that men enter life with different equipments of natural power, and this difference will certainly express itself in consequences beyond. Some men, who have dwelt constantly and even bitterly on the social and other inequalities of life, have endeavoured to console themselves by reflecting that nature and books redress the balance. Whatever be our position in life, they say, we are all equally free to enjoy a writer like Shakespeare; monarchs and working men are, for the moment, on a level before the genius and insight which instructs and delights us all. Again, whatever be our position in life, we are all equally free to enjoy nature. The outline of the great mountain, the first burst of spring, the glories of the autumnal sunset, the mystery of the heavens on a clear night, the sea with its ever-changing moods of storm and calm;—these are common property. Undoubtedly to a certain extent this is true. But in order to relish the masterpieces of literature, at least some education is needed; and men who would enjoy nature most thoroughly are not always free enough or wealthy enough to visit her where she may be seen to the best advantage. It is otherwise with those elemen-

tary movements of the soul, upon which God sheds His mercy, and which are the first steps, as they are the crowning accomplishments, of a religious life. Every human heart may fear and love the Being Who made it. Religious instruction and religious opportunities are indeed precious; and when they are within reach, fear and love will conspire to make the most of them, since assuredly they cannot be neglected without peril. But when they are not to be had, if there be the fear of God in the heart, there, most surely, is His mercy too. And where there is the love of the Perfect Moral Being, there also is within reach a Presence in the soul which may even compare with that vouchsafed to Mary. "If any man love Me, he will keep My words: and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him."^a Only one woman could be the Mother of the Most Holy when He vouchsafed to enter our human world; but there is no reason why each and all of us should not know by experience what the Apostle means by that astonishing yet most blessed saying, "Christ in you, the Hope of glory."^b

^a St. John xiv. 23.

^b Col. i. 27.

III.

VICISSITUDES OF MEN AND NATIONS.

ST. LUKE I. 51-53.

*He hath showed strength with His Arm ;
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down princes from their thrones,
And hath exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things ;
And the rich He hath sent empty away.*

BETWEEN the second strophe of the Magnificat and the third, there is a contrast which makes the transition from one to the other appear somewhat abrupt. In the second strophe, so far as her humility would permit, Mary was speaking of herself; she foretold her place throughout all time in the memories and hearts of men; she touched upon the great things which God had done to her; she was not excluding a personal reference when she sang of that Mercy of God which unto all generations is on them that fear Him. But in the strophe which is before us to-day, she is surveying the wide field of human history; she sees God's

Arm of power displayed in it conspicuously; she notes the changes which God makes in the fortunes of dynasties and nations; and His rule of action in the kingdom of grace.

“He hath showed strength with His Arm;
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down princes from their thrones,
And hath exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
And the rich He hath sent empty away.”

What is the connection between that more personal history and this larger survey of the action of God in the civil and religious affairs of man? How does Mary come to have passed so rapidly from one to the other?

Here let us take note of a common experience of the human mind in all ages, whether within the sphere of inspiration or outside it. At times of deeply moved feeling, whether of joy or sorrow, the soul of man is raised above the level of its average existence, and enjoys the command of a larger outlook. The petty cares of life are lost sight of in these moments of unwonted elevation; and wide and extended horizons, which are ordinarily beyond the range of sight, come into view. From the crest of the wave that is bearing him towards

an unknown shore, the mariner looks out for an instant on a distant prospect, it may be of precipitous cliffs, it may be of hills and valleys and peaceful homesteads, and all that recalls the security of a landsman's life;—but he has no sooner descried it than he sinks forthwith into the trough of the sea. And the human soul is able, when borne upwards by a wave of feeling, to perceive larger fields of truth than usual, even though the vision fades almost at the moment of its being enjoyed. Something of this kind has often been observed at the approach of death. Men who are not generally given to hazard predictions, or even to enunciate general principles, will sometimes speak on their death-beds as though they were invested with a kind of prophetic character; so large would seem to be their range of view, so clear and confident their opinion as to what will or will not happen after they are gone. A great joy will sometimes have a like result; and we may have observed how recovery from the extremity of illness, or the birth of a son, or unlooked-for deliverance from impending ruin, will lead even taciturn people to speculate aloud on the influences which govern human life, and with which they feel themselves for the moment to be in vivid contact.

Mary's inspiration would not have withdrawn her from the operation of this law of the special illumination which is attendant on certain states of elevated feeling. Her own experience would lead her to reflect on God's general principles of government. For the principles on which He deals with single souls are the same principles as those which control His dealings with nations and races and Churches; the difference lies in the scale of their application. When Newton saw an apple fall from the tree, and had asked himself why it did not go upwards instead of downwards, he had discovered the law which governs the movements of the heavenly bodies; and when Mary surveyed her own history closely, she recognized the principles of God's general government of the world. She was a descendant of David's line; and she knew how in the past her ancestors had been put down from their thrones, while she, in her low estate, had been exalted to a far higher honour than is conferred by any earthly crown. Like every true Israelite, she had longed to see God's promised salvation; and lo! she was to be the Mother of the Promised One. Such experiences could not but lead her to consider the general truths which they so strikingly illustrated; but, before she

announces them, she pauses to do homage to a fact which takes precedence of them, and which throws them out into full relief.

I.

That fact is the active and never-failing Providence of Him Who ordereth all things both in heaven and earth. No fact, perhaps, is so widely confessed and so practically forgotten as God's action in the affairs of the world and of men's separate lives. Yet those who believe in God may always verify it, since it explains, and it alone explains, much which takes place; while if much also takes place which it does not explain to our apprehensions, we may reflect that, alike in what He does and in what He permits, God, as the Infinite Being, naturally does and allows much which we could not understand. But Mary sings that "He hath showed strength with His Arm." The human arm represents man's working power. The arm executes the orders of the will; and it is in the vigorous, quickly moving arm that we recognize a will of energy and decision. Thus, in the language of the Hebrews, the word "arm" was generally used in the sense of power; as when the man of God

prophesied to Eli the downfall of his family: "Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father's house;"^a or when Jeremiah exclaims that the "arm of Moab is broken;"^b or Ezekiel, speaking in the Name of God, "I have broken the arm of Pharaoh King of Egypt."^c A word thus employed to denote human power was naturally used of the Power of God, without, of course, implying that the Divine Being, in ages before the Incarnation, had taken on Him any likeness to the human form. Thus God is often said to deliver His people from Egypt, and from later oppressions, "with an outstretched Arm,"^d that is, by a special exertion of His power. And a Psalmist sings how God "with His own right Hand and His holy Arm hath gotten Himself the victory;"^e and another, that "He had scattered His enemies abroad with His mighty Arm."^f And Isaiah speaks of God's showing "the lighting down of His Arm;"^g and he predicts that the Arm of the Lord shall be on the Chaldeans;^h and he invokes the Divine attribute of power in favour of captive Israel: "Awake, awake,

^a 1 Sam. ii. 31.^b Jer. xlvi. 25.^c Ezek. xxx. 21.^d Deut. v. 15; vii. 19; xi. 2; xxvi. 8; Ps. cxxxvi. 12.^e *Ib.* xcvi. 1.^f *Ib.* lxxxix. 10.^g Isa. xxx. 30.^h *Ib.* xlvi. 14.

put on thy strength, O Arm of the Lord ;”^a and he asks, with reference to the future Redeemer, considered as embodying and exhibiting to men the Power of God, “To whom is the Arm of the Lord revealed ?”^b These, as all readers of their Bibles would know, are only a few of the passages which might be quoted ; so that Mary was using old and consecrated language when she described God’s power by the metaphor of an “arm.” But what does she mean by saying that God had “showed strength with His Arm” ? Clearly that His incessant energy had brought about particular results which were calculated to impress human minds with the sense of His power, as vividly as though they had seen the heavens open, and an arm of irresistible might stretched out to shape the course of men and events according to the good pleasure of their Invisible Ruler. One of the principal uses of the historical books of the Old Testament is to accustom us to look at all history in this way ; to see God’s Hand and Arm in it ; to trace in circumstances which might seem trivial or a matter of course, the strong action of His Holy Will. God is not less present in English than in Jewish affairs ; nor has He less concern with our separate

^a Isa. li. 9.

^b *Ib.* liii. 1.

lives than with those of the forefathers and heroes and saints of Israel ; the great difference is that, as a rule, we do not see Him, whereas they did. Mary, at any rate, before she goes further, will not leave the matter in doubt ; God, she says, “ hath showed strength with His Arm.”

II.

She passes on to note one particular series of events, running through long periods of history in which this action of the Arm of God is especially manifested—

“ He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down princes from their thrones,
And hath exalted them of low degree.”

Mary here, it seems, looks backward and forward ; she is at once historian and prophetess ; she is proclaiming principles of the Divine Government which will be as true in the remote future as they have been true in the distant past. She looks backward over the ages of history, and she beholds kingdoms which have fallen from great prosperity into utter ruin ; and princes whose names were once the terror of the world, while their thrones have long since been vacant, or humbled with the dust.

“He hath scattered the proud,” or literally, “the insolently proud.”* The word which she uses accurately describes the prevailing temper of the average occupant of an Eastern throne. It is the temper which is naturally produced by long-continued success, by the accumulation of much wealth and power. It is to be found on a small scale in men among ourselves in private life, who have had everything their own way, made money rapidly, achieved social and perhaps some political importance, and above all have had many years of unbroken health. To prosper after this fashion, and to remain humble, self-distrustful, unselfish, mindful of the real conditions of life, of the nearness of death, of the weakness of the strongest man, and of the awful Presence and Power Which is around and above us,—this is the exception rather than the rule. The rule is, that when very prosperous men are not under the influences of religion, they become haughty and self-asserting, even although they should have sufficient good taste, as distinct from religious principle, to check the exuberant exhibition of these tendencies in what they do and say. But if such a temper exists in Christendom and in private life, think what may happen when a man is in

* *ὑπερηφάνους.*

the position of one of the ancient kings of Egypt or Assyria ; with unchecked power over the lives and fortunes of his subjects ; with vast wealth, large armies, and a great company of accomplished slaves altogether at his disposal. Wonderful indeed it would be if, without the control of the true religion, the heart of a man in such a position did not swell with an intolerable pride ; wonderful if he did not altogether lose sight of the real measure of things, of the place of every dying man in the universe of God, of his true relations with God and with his brother-men. Mary knows this, and thus she sings of God's scattering the insolently proud *in*, or rather *by*, the imaginations of their hearts.^a The false estimate of self, of men and things, which is engendered by the temper in question, is constantly fatal to the position which has appeared to warrant it. It overrates its own resources ; it underrates the resources of others ; it overrates material wealth or power ; it underrates the strength of those moral convictions which lie deep in the hearts of millions of men ; it is so inflated by the successes of the

^a Meyer's theory that *διανοία* is here a dative of more precise definition, would make the phrase too nearly tautologous. Pride cannot exist outside the *διάνοια τῆς καρδιάς* of the proud.

past, that it cannot coolly take account of the contingencies of the future; it is so full of its Austerlitz and its Jena, that it cannot anticipate what may happen amid the snows of Russia, or during a retreat from Moscow. It is not a peculiarity of the ancient, as also it is not of the modern, world; it is not less true in private than in public life, that God in His own time and way scatters to the winds highhanded insolence as being too full of self to recognize the conditions on which any position is held in this world, by any man or any people whatever.

Mary, no doubt, would often have heard her parents discuss the fall of those ancestors of hers and theirs who had last sat in Jerusalem on the throne of David; and consider how far their temper and conduct or that of some of their predecessors had helped to bring it all about; and repeat the solemn truths contained in those warnings of Jeremiah, which to the last kings of Judah and their courtiers appeared to be so unpatriotic and disloyal. But if these monarchs of what was only an inconsiderable state had to learn that they would not therefore reign because they closed themselves in cedars,^a their fall was, in the outward scale of events,

^a Jer. xxii. 15.

of trifling importance when compared with that of the occupants of the mighty thrones around them. The Egyptian hieroglyphics and the cuneiform characters have yielded up their secrets to the industry of modern scholars; and we have before our eyes the proud inscriptions in which the old kings of Egypt and Assyria announced their will or proclaimed their triumphs to their subjects and to the world. Nothing is more remarkable in these inscriptions than the astonishing self-assertion which from first to last inspires them: they are the language of men who sincerely believe that no bounds to their power exist, and that to traverse their will is an unpardonable crime. The Egyptian kings believed that they were deities in human form,^a and they spoke and acted accordingly. More than one Syrian monarch after Alexander described himself as "God."^b And the Bible bears a like witness to the temper of the ancient monarchies. Ezekiel records a saying of the contemporary Pharaoh about the Nile: "My river is mine own, and I have made it for myself."^c Daniel tells us that Nebu-

^a Cf. quotations from the inscriptions in Renouf's *Hibbert Lecture* for 1879, p. 162 sq.

^b Antiochus II., Antiochus IV., the great oppressor of the Jews, and Antiochus VI., describe themselves on their coins as ΘΕΟΣ.

^c Ezek. xxix. 3.

chadnezzar "walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon; and the king spake, and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?"^a And how does Ezekiel address a much less considerable potentate, the Prince of Tyre? "Thine heart is lifted up; thou hast said, I am a god, I sit in the seat of God, in the midst of the seas."^b In a later age there was a scene at Cæsarea which illustrates the point before us, when "Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration" to the embassies from Tyre and Sidon; "and the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man."^c

Mary knew what had happened to Egypt; she knew what had been the fate of Tyre and of Babylon. Before her eyes there passed a long procession of vacant and ruined thrones. Assyria had gone down before Babylon; Babylon and Egypt before the Persians; the Persians before the great Alexander. Alexander's generals in Egypt and in Syria had set up monarchies which by turns oppressed Israel in the later stages of its history; never did a nation sustain a more

^a Dan. iv. 29, 30. ^b Ezek. xxviii. 2. ^c Acts xii. 21, 22.

exhausting struggle for its very life than did the Jews under the Maccabees. But these oppressors too had recently gone their way ; in Egypt and Syria they had alike been humbled before the Roman power. It might be said that when Mary sang, the East was still echoing to the crash of falling thrones ; and one power remained supreme on earth—at least to the apprehension of populations that had never heard of what was even then going on in India and China—the Imperial power of Rome.

But Mary is a prophetess no less than an historian ; and as she could foretell her own place in the memory of the grateful Church, so she could divine what would happen to the great world-Empire. She speaks of what God *has* done. “He hath scattered ;” “He hath put down ;” “He hath exalted ;” “He hath filled ;” “He hath sent away.” But this is sometimes the style of a prophet, who is by no means obliged to use a future tense when foretelling a future time. The vision of the future passes before the prophet’s soul ; and he describes what he sees as actually occurring, or as already accomplished. Thus it is that Isaiah, in the latter part of his book, foretells the captivity in Babylon as though it had already produced a state of things in the midst of which he was actually living ; and

the prophets sometimes use a past tense advisedly, as expressing as vividly as possible their conviction that the predicted future is as certain as the past. If, then, Mary speaks of God as having put down princes from their thrones, she may mean Roman emperors to come no less than the dynasties which had long since ruled on the Nile or on the Euphrates.

When Mary sang, Rome was at the height of her power; the greatest part of the known world obeyed her laws. Her legions had planted their eagles on the Rhine, on the Danube, on the Euphrates, on the Nile, in the deserts of Africa. Her civilization, with its blessings and its vices; her institutions, her manners and motives, even her language, had followed. The world was already Roman, not only in name, but to a large extent in sympathy and purpose; and no social and political fabric that had ever bound civilized men together seemed so strong or so durable as that which stood around the throne of the Cæsars. And yet the causes which had brought about the downfall of earlier powers were at work within the great Empire. Material splendour had blinded men's eyes to the secret symptoms of decay, and to the truths and virtues which could alone avert it; and at last the crash came. It nearly came in the third century,

after Christ, two hundred years before its time. It did come with overwhelming terrors in the fifth, when everything that had been venerated for centuries, save only the Church of God, was involved in one vast catastrophe, and when Goths and Huns, and Vandals and Lombards, swept like waves of angry men over the wreck of the old civilization. Thus at last the words were fulfilled which St. John had heard in ecstasy, "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen!"^a

But the work of the Arm of God, as Mary watches it from afar, is not merely or chiefly destructive; it scatters and destroys only that it may gather and rebuild. As the Church says with such truth and beauty, "God declareth His Almighty Power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity."^b When Mary sings that God hath exalted the humble and meek, or rather, them of "low estate," she may well be thinking of the position of Israel among the nations of the world; surrounded by mighty monarchies, while itself occupying a territory not much larger than an English county, yet chosen to be the people of Revelation, and to exercise an altogether unrivalled influence on the future of the human race. Or she may have in her mind such careers as those of

^a Rev. xiv. 8.

^b Collect for Eleventh Sunday after Trinity.

Joseph at the court of Egypt in one age, and of Daniel and Esther at the courts of Babylon and Persia in another. Nor can she but have borne in her grateful soul an ever-present and overwhelming sense of the exceptional honour put upon herself. What royal distinctions were in reality ever comparable to hers who was the chosen Mother of Emmanuel; to hers, of whom—as St. Paul said of her race—as concerning the flesh, Christ came, Who is over all, God blessed for ever?^a

And may we not here also observe that Mary's words have a reference to the future as well as to the past? Does she not already descry a far-off time, when the disciples of the Crucified would succeed to the empire of the world; when “the meek would inherit the earth, and be refreshed in the multitude of peace”?^b The triumph of Christianity, notwithstanding the faults of individual Christians, was on the whole a victory of purity and patience, of humility and conscientiousness, over the corruption, violence, pride, lack of serious moral principle, which so largely characterized the social fabric of the old empire. And Mary beheld the coming victory; she saw that it was involved in the angel's promise respecting her Son. “He shall reign over

^a Rom. ix. 5.

^b Ps. xxxvii. 11.

the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.”^a

How far happier would men be, if they could only be sure that their future place in another world, if not here, will be the reverse—I do not say of their place, but—of their temper, whether of self-effacement or of self-assertion, in this! Doubtless there have been paupers who have cherished in their rags the pride of discontent in a measure not unworthy to be compared with Sennacherib’s pride of success;^b and there have been kings whom crown and sceptre, and the fascinations of power, and the adulations of a court, have not rendered incapable of cultivating the humble and patient temper of a Christian saint. The position counts for little; the important point is the temper. As it is the self-asserting temper which God deposes from its throne of pride, so it is the self-renouncing temper which He exalts to His realm of glory. How could it be otherwise, when the Most Holy, being in the form of God, did not deem His equality with God a prize to be eagerly grasped, but emptied Himself of His glory, and took on Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of man, in order that this same mind might be in us which was also in

^a St. Luke i. 33.

^b 2 Kings xviii. 33-35.

Himself, Christ Jesus?^a And what more natural and fitting than that the Mother of the Incarnate God should proclaim a moral truth which is the first lesson of the Incarnation of her Son?

III.

Corresponding with this law of the depression of the insolent and the exaltation of the unpretending, is God's rule of administration in the purely spiritual world. They who are sensible of their needs and deficiencies, who are seeking truth and longing for grace, are, sooner or later, satisfied. They who deem themselves to have need of nothing from on high, who are sure that they see at once to the bottom of every question, who hold that they can do right without any aid from the Author of all goodness—the self-reliant and the self-complacent,—these men are excluded from a share in the Divine bounty.

“He hath filled the hungry with good things;
But the rich He hath sent empty away.”

This principle, that a sense and confession of want must precede in intelligent men any communication of God's best blessings, is in keeping, as

^a Phil. ii. 6, 7.

Mary's metaphor suggests, with the law of nature. If food is to invigorate the body, if it is not to be an incumbrance, and a cause of discomfort and disease, it must be welcomed by appetite. Appetite is nature's certificate that food will not be injurious. And if a soul is to be benefited by truth or grace, that soul must desire the blessing. No fact is more constantly insisted on in Holy Scripture than this; unless it be another fact which follows as a consequence, namely, that God withholds His best blessings when men do not seek them.

This is the constant teaching of the Old Testament. "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it."^a "Call upon Me," says God, by the mouth of Jeremiah, to Israel—"call upon Me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not."^b "If," says Solomon, "thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God."^c And so a Psalmist during the exile sings: "Blessed are they that keep God's testimonies, and seek Him with their whole heart. . . . I have had as great delight in the way of Thy testi-

^a Ps. lxxxi. 10.^b Jer. xxxiii. 3.^c Prov. ii. 3-5.

monies as in all manner of riches. . . . Open Thou mine eyes, that I may see the wondrous things out of Thy Law. . . . My soul hath longed for Thy salvation, and I have a good hope because of Thy Word. Mine eyes long sore for Thy Word, saying, O when wilt Thou comfort me? . . . I have longed for Thy saving health, O Lord; and in Thy Law is my delight. O let my soul live, and it shall praise Thee.”^a

This teaching and these prayers would have been familiar to Mary; and her Son and Lord confirmed their import in after-years. “Ask, and ye shall have; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”^b

On the other hand, Mary proclaims that “the rich He hath sent empty away.” God does not force Himself on those who think that they can do without Him. He offers them His good things; and if He meets with the indifference of an imaginary sufficiency, He passes on. They who deem themselves too well off to need Him, are taken at their word; and they cannot complain if it be so. So it was in the days of our Lord and His Apostles.

^a Ps. cxix. 2, 14, 18, 81, 82, 174, 175.

^b St. Matt. vii. 7, 8.

Herod, Pilate, Felix, all came close to truth, and were sent empty away; while Simeon and Anna, and first one, and then another Apostle—the fishermen, the tax-gatherer, the tent-maker—and later on, Cornelius the centurion, were filled with the good things of faith in the Unseen, and hope in an endless inheritance, and love towards God and man. And as with individuals, so with classes of men. The average Greek, satisfied with his shallow pride of culture, had no eye for the realities of the moral world, or for his own deep need of pardon and grace. He toyed with some one of the current philosophies; and if it told him nothing certainly about those things which it most concerns a thinking man to know, it at least produced in him a sense of tranquil satisfaction with life and with his own powers. And the average Jew was either a hard-headed sceptic like the Sadducees, or a man of phrases and proprieties like that Pharisee who is apostrophized by St. Paul: "Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the Law, and makest thy boast of God, and knowest His Will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the Law; and art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which

hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the Law.”^a This is a picture of the temper of a great number of Jews in the Apostolic age ; and we can understand how, in such a state of mind, “they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, went about to establish their own righteousness, not submitting themselves to the righteousness of God.”^b The earlier chapters of the Epistle to the Romans are devoted to breaking down, in Gentile^c and Jew^d alike, this fatal temper of satisfaction with self, and to proving that, since all the world is guilty before God, all need that gift of pardon and peace which is offered by His Blessed Son, Incarnate and Crucified for men.

This consideration may enable us to answer two questions which are often asked nowadays, and which are sufficiently practical in their bearings.

And first, Why do so many people, who have opportunities of knowing Christian truth, and have good natural abilities, often know so little about its real character ?

The answer, at least in a great many cases, is, that they do not make a serious effort to find out what it is. They take it for granted that while

^a Rom. ii. 17-20

^c *Ib.* i. 18-32.

^b Rom. x. 3.

^d *Ib.* ii. 17-iii. 31.

you cannot master a science or learn a new language without some serious trouble, religious knowledge will somehow come to them as a matter of course. They have learnt something about it many years ago, and that, they think, will do. They give the real energy and vigour of their minds to the things of this world; they reserve a few spare moments for religion. Religion, they say to themselves, being meant for all, can be thoroughly understood, with a very little effort, by any person of average ability; and to spend too much labour on it would be a waste of time.

Now, natural ability has nothing necessarily to do with the real apprehension of religious truth. It can master the surroundings of religion; the evidences on which the Creed depends; the historical circumstances which accompanied the appearance of our Lord among men; the outline of Church history; the controversies which have arisen on religious matters from century to century. But the essential point, the appeal which our Lord makes to the moral and spiritual faculty in a man, has no more to do with his intellectual capacity than it has with his accomplishments as an athlete or as an artist. And unless the spiritual faculty be on the alert, hungering to be satisfied with the good things

of God, religious truth falls dead upon the soul, whatever a man's natural ability may be. It is one thing to read about religion, and to use religious language; and a very good thing too, as far as it goes. But it is another to perceive the reality of religion from its perfect adaptation to the wants and aspirations of a man's own soul. And this perception is impossible if we allow ourselves to think that, as we already know all about religion, there is no need for further trouble. However much he may have learnt about God, a true Christian is always learning; and he ever bears in mind, that, since he, a finite being, is face to face with the Infinite, there must always be something, or rather much, to learn. He is always forgetting those things that are behind, and pressing forward to those things that are before.^a The moment he ceases to do this; ceases to desire to know more of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ; the pores of his soul close up, and a process of spiritual atrophy begins to develop itself. To him, not less than to souls that are choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of this life, is addressed the solemn warning: "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest

^a Phil. iii. 13.

not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked : I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich ; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear ; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.”^a

And the other question is, Why do many of us apparently get so little moral and spiritual strength from the Holy Communion ? Considering what that Sacrament really is, and Who it is That we meet in it, and the purpose with which He comes, we may wonder that it is, in so many cases, to all appearance, so unfruitful in spiritual results.

Well, my brethren, there may be some other answers to that very important question ; but one answer, doubtless, is that we do not sufficiently long for it. Our Lord Himself said of the last Passover at which He met His disciples, “ With desire have I desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer ; ”^b and every communicant ought to be able to say to our Lord, before each Communion, “ With desire have I desired once more to receive this Thy Sacrament before I die.” Such desire must grow out of and be prompted by an unaffected sense of our weakness, nay, of our impotence, without the

^a Rev. iii. 17, 18.

^b St. Luke xxii. 15.

strengthening Presence and aid of our Lord Jesus Christ; but to a soul that has any relish for spiritual things, this desire is not less spontaneous than is the craving for food in a hungry man. Such a desire prompts and guides preparation for Communion; review of conscience, confession of sins, prayers for the dispositions of repentance, faith, hope and love, which befit the approach to this great means of grace. The spirit of this desire is that of the Psalmist in exile on the hills of Bashan, who, as his thoughts wandered to the services in the distant temple, beheld at his feet the wild gazelles tracking the water-courses that furrowed the mountain-sides in search of some spring which might slake their thirst: "Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks, so longeth my soul after Thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God: when shall I come to appear before the Presence of God?"*

May our Lord Jesus Christ, of His great Mercy, empty us of all which so satisfies the soul as to make it insensible to His supreme attractions; and then may He fill us with such true love of Himself, that we, loving Him above all things, may obtain His promises, which exceed all that we can desire!

IV.

GOD'S MERCY AND FAITHFULNESS IN THE DIVINE INCARNATION.

ST. LUKE I. 54, 55.

*He hath holpen His servant Israel,
In remembrance of His mercy
(As He promised to our forefathers)
Towards Abraham and his seed for ever.*

TO-DAY we reach the closing strophe of Mary's Hymn ; and it is obvious to remark how naturally, as the utterance of a religious mind, this strophe follows on all that have gone before it. Mary has told us how all the powers of her soul and spirit were engaged in praising God for the great and distinguishing honour which had been vouchsafed to her ; she has described this distinction, so far as she might, in itself and in some of its consequences ; she has dwelt upon the connection between it and the great rules by which God governs the world at large, and the kingdom of souls. And now she would follow the gracious mystery confided to her

up to its source in the Life of God ; and she finds it in His attributes of Mercy and Faithfulness.

“ He hath holpen His servant Israel,
In remembrance of His mercy
(As He promised to our forefathers)
Towards Abraham and his seed for ever.”

“ He hath holpen His servant Israel.” Mary, of course, is referring, under cover of this general statement, to the Incarnation of the Son of God, Whose Mother, as the Angel had announced, she was to be. The terms she uses are vague and distant, as in earlier verses of her Hymn: “ He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden. . . . He That is mighty hath done great things unto me.” When we consider what the coming of the Eternal Son of God, clothed in our human nature, into this our world, really meant, for all races and for all times, it might be deemed little enough to say that by such an event God had brought help to Israel. But, in fact, Mary's vagueness and reserve is not without a reason. In the earlier lines of her Hymn, as we have seen, it may be explained by the instincts of a sanctified character, when touching upon subjects that intimately affect personal standing before God.* In

* See pp. 44-50.

the last strophe it is dictated by her immediate purpose, which is to find the source of the Incarnation in God's attributes of Lovingkindness and Truth. This could but be done by pointing to His past relations with Israel ; since the Birth of His Only begotten Son of a Jewish Mother was the fitting complement and crown of those relations. "He remembering His mercy towards Abraham and his seed for ever, hath holpen His servant Israel."

I.

The Incarnation of our Lord, then, is ascribed by Mary, first of all, to God's remembrance of His mercy towards Abraham and his descendants. The words, "Towards Abraham and his seed for ever," are certainly connected in the original with the words, "For a remembrance of His mercy," although the line, "As He spake to our forefathers," is parenthetically inserted between the two halves of the clause. It was not, as in other places, God's mercy over all His works, or over all the race of mankind, but His mercy towards Abraham and certain of His descendants, that God is here said to have remembered. Why He should have selected this particular family to be the object of His

especial favour ; to be constantly visited by His envoys ; to be the guardian of His Revelation and His Will ; to be thus chosen out of all nations for a post of spiritual and exceptional distinction ;—is a subject on which we may speculate, but can arrive at no certain knowledge. We can only say with the Apostle that He has mercy on whom He will have mercy.^a The unequal distribution of gifts and privileges among His creatures by the Creator is unintelligible to that passion for equality which is a conspicuous ingredient of the social or political temper of our day. But, whatever we may think about it, there it is ; it is written on the face of God's works. If, without detriment to His attributes of Justice and Love, God could create the various orders of living beings which we see around us, and which differ so surprisingly in the qualities which enable them to maintain and protect life ; if, as human beings come into the world, they find themselves equipped by the Creator, some with the highest gifts of genius, and others with so low an order of intelligence as scarcely to deserve the name ; if even the moral as well as the mental and physical advantages of men are so various ; then God's choice of Israel is at least in harmony

^a Rom. ix. 15.

with the general rule of His administration, and is governed by considerations and motives which, as lying behind creation itself, are out of the reach of human criticism. He hath mercy on whom He will have mercy ; and, if we are satisfied that His decisions are those of a perfectly holy Will, we bow our heads and are silent.

The family of Abraham was God's choice ; and in this choice there lay the earnest of blessings yet to come. For the calling as well as the gifts of God are without repentance.* They are, as befits the majesty and generosity of the Giver, irrevocable. They may take different forms from age to age, as the temper and dispositions of men may require ; but God's "mercy towards Abraham and his seed for ever" was as much a part of His Will as the existence of any separate order of rational or irrational life ; and Mary sees a signal proof of it in the fact that the Son of God was to be born of a Jewish Mother. "He remembering His mercy towards Abraham and his seed for ever, hath holpen His servant Israel."

But, further, it is plain from the terms of the promises to the patriarchs, that, in the Divine Mind, Israel included others than the race of men

* Rom. xi. 29.

who were lineally descended from the patriarchs, and whom the Apostle calls Israel "after the flesh." Mary had already sung of God's mercy as being on them that fear Him throughout all generations;^a and this earlier phrase of hers, probably, does not mean anything very different from God's Mercy towards Abraham and his seed in its wider sense. For who are the real "seed" or descendants of Abraham? Not only they, St. Paul has told us, who could claim descent from Abraham by blood,^b although such were so far from being excluded from a higher relationship with Abraham than the merely physical one, that they had a first claim to it.^c But the Apostle insists that Abraham's seed includes millions who had no blood-relationship with the patriarch whatever; that the promise that in Abraham's seed all nations of the earth should be blessed, imposed upon the idea of descent, in Abraham's case, a much wider and more spiritual meaning; that the children of this promise, those who by faith in and union with Jesus Christ made it their own, were counted for a seed,—were reckoned among Abraham's descendants,—though they belonged to races utterly distinct from the stock of Abraham.

^a St. Luke i. 50. ^b Rom. ix. 8, cf. iv. 16. ^c *Ib.* xi. 17.

This is not so strange an idea as it may appear at first sight, if we will reflect that there are two ways in which a man may be said to live on in this world after he has left it. He may live on by the transmission of his blood, and by the transmission of his convictions, ideas, type of character. They are by no means incompatible forms of survival—God forbid; but they are at least very distinct from each other. Jonadab the son of Rechab, who was associated with King Jehu at a critical period in his career,^a is an instance of a man who combines the two fatherhoods in a remarkable degree; he was the spiritual as well as the natural ancestor of his descendants, the Rechabites. He lived on from age to age, not only in their strong Bedouin frames, but in their method of life. They were wandering men, dwelling in tents, and were bound by him to certain ascetic observances; and long after he was gone, as we know from Jeremiah, when they were forced by the Chaldean invasion to take refuge within the walls of Jerusalem, they could not be induced to transgress the rule of their progenitor.^b A man may be the parent of an enormous family without transmitting to them anything whatever except the gift of physical life. Or he

^a 2 Kings x. 15, *seq.*

^b Jer. xxxv. 19.

may be childless, and yet may live after his death in the convictions of thousands whom he has formed by his precepts and his example. And, if the question be raised which is the nobler sort of ancestry—the purely zoological, or the spiritual, the parentage of mere animal life, or the communication of principles and ideas which govern life—surely there can be no doubt about the answer. There can be no doubt which of these kinds of ancestry is common to man with the animals below him; and which is his prerogative distinction as a being in whom an immortal and spiritual nature is linked to a bodily form, but without waiving its claim to superiority and leadership. St. Paul resists the Jewish boast that descent from Abraham is limited to those in whose veins the blood of Abraham still flows; he claims for Abraham the immeasurably larger family of those who have inherited Abraham's firm hold of and trust in the Unseen, as shown in his practical obedience.^a And this loftier and vaster spiritual ancestry underlies Mary's language, too: the objects of God's mercy are not only or chiefly the natural descendants of the patriarch, but the millions whose faith in the Unseen is counted to them for righteousness.

^a Rom. iv. 12, 18-22.

Why, let it once more be asked, should either Israel—the Israel by blood or the Israel through faith—be objects of the Divine Mercy? Why, but because Mercy radiates from God as do light and heat from the natural sun? When we Christians name God, we do not mean only a resistless force, which has brought about and maintains all that is; we do not mean only a boundless intelligence, which has left marks of design and contrivance in all that is; we mean also and especially that moral quality which is revealed in the gift of self; we mean love. Only by His desire to surround Himself with creatures who might be the objects of His love, can we account for the mystery of creation;—that first and greatest innovation on the Eternal Life of God. And when love looks out upon a world, or a race, or a single being, in whom sin, need, pain, dissatisfaction with life as it is, are manifest, love takes the form of mercy. Mercy is love in its attitude towards the suffering, the sinful, and the fallen; and God's Mercy was ever presiding over the destinies of Israel. You remember that later Psalm, which so often attracts the attention of young children by the peculiarity of its structure, and in which this truth is brought out more vividly than anywhere else in the Psalter.^a Act after act

^a Ps. cxxxvi.

of God, from the making of the heavens, and laying out the earth above the waters, down to the deliverance from the prison in Babylon, is followed by the line, "For His mercy endureth for ever." It was this enduring Mercy which accounted for the wonders in Egypt; for the overthrow of Pharaoh; for the passage through the wilderness; for the conquest of Sihon and Og; for the inheritance of Canaan; for the escape from the exile. "His mercy endureth for ever." And Mary would place the Divine Incarnation, too, in the light of this luminous and gracious Attribute, of which it was indeed in human history the crowning and supreme expression. "He remembering His mercy hath holpen His servant Israel," by the Incarnation of His Son.

II.

But a second account of the help thus vouchsafed to Israel follows. God was pledged. "He hath holpen His servant Israel, as He promised," or spake, "to our forefathers."

The question has been asked how God could ever have pledged His word to man; and a sort of antecedent impossibility of His doing so has in

some quarters been taken for granted, to the discredit of the Bible narrative. This is only a variety of the general presumption supposed to lie against Revelation which has been made to do duty for serious argument. Why should not God, if He so wills, do that which any of His reasonable creatures can do at their pleasure? Why should He not, if He so wills, unveil His Mind? Why should He not, if so He wills, pledge His word of promise? The assumption that, for some undefined reason, He cannot do these things, breaks down as soon as we look it steadily in the face. The Author of all intercourse between one of His creatures and another, can Himself, surely, hold intercourse with any as seems best to Him. Doubtless, His methods of revealing His Will vary in different ages of human history. An angel, an inspired soul, even a dream, may be the channel of a promise or a revelation.

Among the promises to the patriarchs which Mary glances at, those may be presumed to be especially in her view which stated, whether distinctly or by implication, that the Promised One would be born of their descendants. Thus the promise ran to Abraham, in Haran: "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed;"* at Hebron: "I

* Gen. xii. 3.

will establish My covenant with Isaac for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him ;”^a in the plain of Mamre : “ Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him ;”^b after the offering of Isaac : “ In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed ; because thou hast obeyed My voice.”^c To Isaac, in Gerar : “ I will perform the oath which I swore unto Abraham thy father ; and I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, . . . and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”^d To Jacob, in Bethel : “ Thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south ; and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”^e

These promises, besides connecting the anticipated blessing with the descendants of Abraham, make two other assertions about it. It was to extend to the whole human race : so each of the three patriarchs was in turn assured, as if to rebuke by anticipation the narrow national prejudice of

^a Gen. xvii. 19. ^b *Ib.* xviii. 18. ^c *Ib.* xxii. 18.

^d *Ib.* xxvi. 3, 4.

^e *Ib.* xxviii. 14.

the later Jews. And it was to last. Unlike other promises to nations or dynasties, it was not conditioned; it would not be transitory in its effects; it would not depend upon the fortunes of a people or a form of government; it would outlive the vicissitudes of human affairs; it was embodied in "an everlasting covenant;" it would hold good for ever. The promise to the patriarchs was made more definite to their descendants. Its realization was limited first to the tribe of Judah, then to the family of David. Then the Person of the Promised One comes more clearly into view. Isaiah foretells His miraculous Birth,^a His atoning Sufferings,^b His eventual triumph;^c and, with a nearly contemporary Prophet, Micah,^d though in different terms, proclaims His Divinity.^e Lastly, Daniel fixes the date of His appearance;^f and Malachi announces His coming to His Temple,^g and the triumph of His Name and His worship in the heathen world.^h

Reflect how such a promise as this would have been talked over again and again from generation to generation, from century to century, in every Jewish household; how the old people would pass

^a Isa. vii. 14.^b *Ib.* liii. 4-10.^c *Ib.* 12.^d Micah v. 2.^e Isa. ix. 6.^f Dan. ix. 24-26.^g Mal. iii. 1.^h *Ib.* i. 11.

it on to the younger; and how these, at first, perhaps, thinking little of it, as young people do, as of a tradition mainly interesting to a past generation, came in time, as they grew older, to perceive its importance. Great indeed was its importance. For two reigns only, and for a period far short of a century, did Israel attain to anything like political splendour or even consideration. When Solomon had been laid with his fathers, and the division of the ten tribes and the two had taken place, the nation's place in the world was, to all outward appearance, insignificant indeed as compared with that of the great surrounding monarchies. There was little, or nothing, of this world's splendour to stir the imagination or feed the national pride of the descendants of the patriarchs; there were no walls or palaces like those of Babylon; there was no navigable stream teeming with industry and life, like the Nile; nay, the Temple of Jerusalem itself was of diminutive proportions when contrasted with the mighty structures that had existed in Egypt from a date long before the days of Moses. Not only had the divided people little to show in the way of distant conquests; they gradually lost the territories that had been won by David and Solomon: and as years went on, there was less and less reason for thinking

that Israel could ever again be a great power in the East. Thus, in the absence of grounds for satisfaction with their present public circumstances, religious men were led to think more of the promise which had been handed down to them. If they had no great share in the present, they had good hope for the future; if man was not likely to do much for them, they had a confidence that one day God would do much, both for them, and through them, for others. But years passed; first came one disaster, then another; the captivity of Israel by the Assyrians; the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar; the bondage of Judah in Babylon; with its profound distress and humiliation; the many vicissitudes which followed the return; and notably, the hard struggle against Antiochus Epiphanes, who desired to substitute Greek paganism in thought and life for the religion revealed to Moses and the Prophets. Often, in days when all seemed going to ruin, and men's hearts were faint, the question must have been asked in many a humble home up and down the land, whether God had forgotten to be gracious, and whether He would shut up His lovingkindness in displeasure.* So Isaiah anticipates the complaints of Israel in exile:—

* Ps. lxxvii. 9.

“ But Zion saith, The Lord hath forsaken me,
 And my Lord hath forgotten me.
 Can a woman forget her sucking child,
 That she should not have compassion on the son of her
 womb?
 Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.
 Behold, I have graven thee on the palms of My hands;
 Thy walls are continually before Me.”^a

And when the prospect of impending ruin was darker than ever before, Jeremiah reminds his despairing countrymen—

“ Behold, the days come, saith the Lord,
 That I will perform that good thing which I have
 promised
 Unto the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.
 In those days, and at that time,
 Will I cause the Branch of Righteousness
 To grow up unto David. . . . Thus saith the Lord;
 If ye can break My covenant of the day, and My covenant
 of the night,
 That there should not be day and night in their season;
 Then may also My covenant be broken with David My
 servant,
 That he should not have a son to reign upon his throne.”^b

And so the years passed on. It was a long night of expectation, and generation after generation died, as it had lived, in hope; but at last the first streaks of dawn were seen in the East: it was understood

^a Isa. xlix. 14-16.

^b Jer. xxxiii. 14, 15, 20, 21.

that the Sun of Righteousness^a was rising on the world. Says Zacharias—

“He hath raised up a mighty salvation for us,
 In the house of His servant David ;
 As He spake by the mouth of His holy Prophets,
 Which have been since the world began ;
 That we should be saved from our enemies,
 And from the hands of all that hate us ;
 To perform the mercy promised to our forefathers,
 And to remember His holy covenant ;
 To perform the oath which he sware to our forefather Abra-
 ham
 That He would give us.”^b

Or, as Mary sings—

“He hath holpen His servant Israel,
 For a remembrance of His mercy,
 As He spake unto our forefathers.”

III.

Now, the Gospel which was preached by Mary's Divine Son, and which has Him for its central Subject as well as its Author, contains, as St. Peter reminds us, “great and precious promises ; that by these we might be partakers of the Divine Nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”^c But the fulfilment of these

^a Mal. iv. 2.

^b St. Luke i. 69-74.

^c 2 St. Pet. i. 4.

promises is, in large measure, yet to come. Many men find it easy to believe in God's past faithfulness, simply because the past witnesses to His faithfulness. But they hesitate about the future. They assume, without saying it, that He is less present to us than He was to our forefathers, and that, in accordance with modern ways of talking and thinking, His "Hand is shortened that it cannot save."^a

At any rate, we cannot doubt that God may be trusted to keep His word in the world of nature. We lay out our lives upon that presumption. We go to bed night after night without any misgivings as to whether the sun will rise the next morning. We make plans for the autumn, feeling sure that it will be followed by winter; and for the winter, knowing that it will be succeeded by spring, and, in due time, again by summer and autumn. All the proceedings of our farmers and our sailors, nay, of our chemists and physicians, are based on the calculation that God will be true to His general rules of working; that He has given to the world of nature a law which shall not be broken.^b So too our men of science cross the Atlantic to take observations of an eclipse, which they are sure will begin to be visible in a certain

^a Isa. lix. 1.

^b Ps. cxlviii. 6.

place at a given hour and minute, because long observation has taught them that the Almighty Worker never fails to keep His appointments exactly. Indeed, so exact is He, that they themselves will often fail to remember that He works or lives at all; the mechanism of nature by its faultless regularity shuts out from their view the Great Engineer. Sometimes too His constant observance of His rules is pleaded as a reason for foregoing the duties of prayer and thanksgiving, since all, it is presumed, will go on without failure, whether we address our prayers to Him or not. And this, indeed, is why now and then He stays His beneficent Hand, and shows us, in what we call, through our ignorance, the caprices of nature,—in the drought, the storm, the deluge of waters, the destroying plague,—that He is ever at work behind the veil, and that we cannot with impunity trifle with Him; as though He were only an unintelligent force strangely engaged in the complex and subtle manipulation of matter.

But if God keeps His appointments in the world of nature, much more does He keep them in the moral sphere. For while nature might have been, in countless ways, otherwise ordered than as it is, the moral law could not have been other than it

is, since it expresses in human speech the Nature of God, in relation to the circumstances of human life. God might have made us men with differently shaped bodies, with differently furnished minds. But, without being untrue to Himself, He never could have said to us, "Thou mayest do murder; thou mayest commit adultery; thou mayest steal." If the laws of nature, as we call them, fail not, much more impossible is it that the laws of the moral world should fail. If seedtime is followed by harvest, and day by night, much more certain is it that "God is not mocked;" and that "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap;"^a that "he that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption, but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting."^b God's own essential Nature is concerned in maintaining the unfailing regularity of His rules for governing the moral world. "Wherefore should the wicked blaspheme God, while he doth say in his heart, Tush, Thou God carest not for it? Surely Thou hast seen it; for Thou beholdest ungodliness and wrong."^c And on the other hand, "God is not unrighteous, that He will forget your works and labour that proceedeth of love."^d Even a heathen like Sophocles,

^a Gal. vi. 7. ^b *Ib.* 8. ^c Ps x. 14, 15. ^d Heb. vi. 10.

contemplating the moral order of human life, could recognize

“The steadfast laws that walk the sky—
Laws born and reared in the ethereal heaven,
Of which Olympus is alone the sire;
To which no race of mortal man gave birth,
Nor ever shall oblivion lay to sleep.”^a

And we Christians know that God’s righteousness standeth like the strong mountains; that His judgments are as the great deep.^b

The Gospel contains Divine promises to the Christian Society or Church, and to the Christian soul. Why should we think that they are less likely to be observed than God’s rules for the movements of the stars, or for the enforcement of virtue and the repression of vice?

To the Church, for instance, there has been made the great promise that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”^c This promise enables a believing Christian to survey, not, indeed, without distress, but certainly without misgiving, much that he sees around him in the Realm of Christ. Our Lord prayed^d for unity, and everywhere we behold division. Our Lord made holiness a note of

^a *Æd. Tyr.*, 863, *sqq.*

^b Ps. xxxvi. 6.

^c St. Matt. xvi. 18.

^d St. John xvii. 20, 21.

His kingdom,^a and holiness among Christians is the exception rather than the rule. Our Lord promised His Spirit to guide into all truth,^b and we see men adding to or taking away from that truth into which the Apostles were guided. Nor is the difficulty to be removed by saying that one fragment of the Church is the whole of it, or that the true Church of Christ is an invisible society. These are the rude expedients of a supposed controversial necessity; they will not bear the wear and tear of reflection. No! we must admit that an enemy has sown tares among the wheat. Of the Gospel Vine, too, it must be said that whereas

“The hills were covered with the shadow of it,
And the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars,”

it has come to pass that she lies, with “her hedge broken down,” so that “all they that go by pluck off her grapes”—

“The wild boar out of the wood doth root it up,
And the wild beasts of the field devour it.”^c

Certainly the Church’s weakness is the opportunity if not the triumph of unbelief, which, since the earliest age of the Christian Faith, never was so

^a Isa. lx. 21; Jer. xxxi. 33, 34; St. John xiii. 35.

^b St. John xvi. 13.

^c Ps. lxxx. 10–13.

threatening, never had enlisted so many fine intellects in its service, as to-day. But there lies our charter—"the gates of hell shall not prevail." There may be temporary discouragement and defeat; a falling away of prominent men, of large classes; the withering of entire branches of the Sacred Vine. We do not know, but all this and more is possible. What is not possible is that the Divine kingdom should perish from off the face of the earth before the day of our Lord's coming.

So also will the Christian soul recall many and precious promises, on which it may lean during the days of its earthly pilgrimage, and of the eventual fulfilment of which there can be no room for doubt. Promises of deliverance from spiritual foes; promises of victory over insurgent passions; promises of an inward Presence Which can make man a true temple of God; promises of joy and peace in believing; promises which transcend this world and pierce the veil of the next, and embrace in their mighty scope not only time but eternity. "Come unto Me, . . . and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; . . . and ye shall find rest for your souls."^a "If any man love Me, he will keep My words: and My Father will

^a St. Matt. xi. 28, 29.

love him, and We will come unto Him, and make Our abode with him.”^a “In My Father’s house are many mansions : if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. . . . I will come again, and receive you unto Myself ; that where I am, there ye may be also.”^b “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”^c “He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment ; and . . . I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels.”^d “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with My Father in His throne.”^e

There are times when even good Christians are tempted to ask whether such bright and gracious words will be realized. Let them remember how long Israel waited before the promises spoken to the patriarchs were fulfilled in the Son of Mary. Be sure that no word of God returns to Him empty, or without accomplishing that purpose for which He sent it.^f It is so with God’s laws in nature ; it is so with His moral law ; it cannot be otherwise with His promises to His servants. If

^a St. John xiv. 23.

^d *Ib.* iii. 5.

^b *Ib.* 2, 3.

^e *Ib.* 21.

^c Rev. ii. 7.

^f Isa. lv. 11.

He was true to His word in dealing with the old Israel, He will not fail those who belong to the Israel of God.

The conviction that God will keep His pledges to help us carries us, as nothing else can, through the trying changes of our outward circumstances. These changes will sometimes go far to break down the faith of men who have believed for years. Narrow means, weak health, the death of those for whom we care most on earth,—why, men ask, if He is alive, and if He loves us, should God permit it?

Christians sometimes forget that they are to be tried as other men are not; that they are not to count such trials strange;^a that “whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth;”^b that “our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us an exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”^c That which seems so accidental or purposeless, is designed to train us gradually for a higher life; those great sorrows which are sometimes pointed to as showing that we are the sport of some heartless chance, are in truth but so many blows of the chisel of the Eternal Artist, Who is fashioning each character for its high destiny out of the rude material which passes under His Hand and Eye.

^a 1 St. Pet. iv. 12.

^b Heb. xii. 6.

^c 2 Cor. iv. 17.

No one trial, be sure of it, is aimless or unneeded ; poverty, sickness, loss of friends, each has its appointed work to do. And, beyond all, is the certainty that He will be true to His promises ; true to those who overcome the temptation to doubt His word. The bright Morning may not be far distant from thee when thou shalt praise Him

“ Who saveth thy life from destruction,
And crowneth thee with mercy and lovingkindness ;
Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things,
Making thee young and lusty as an eagle.”^a

And this same conviction braces us to encounter those trials of the mind and heart which sometimes bear more hardly on a man than anything outward. You have done your best, you say, and you have met with nothing but disappointment ; you have done your best for a noble cause, and you are credited with devotion to purely selfish ends ; your love and energy has met with ingratitude or contempt. You have spent prayer, time, money, upon the bringing up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and they only attain to manhood to wound you by their neglect, or to shame you by their frivolity or their misconduct. What, you are tempted to ask, is the good of efforts which lead to nothing, at least, so far as

^a Ps. ciii. 4, 5.

you see, in those for whose sake they are made? And then you are out of heart about yourself. You have meant sincerely to consecrate your life to God and lo! you find that which should be a temple of His perpetual Presence degraded by a hundred little sins which are utterly alien to Him; by some vulgar social pride, by some ill-natured and spiteful grudge, by unchristian acts, by words that breathe only covetousness or envy. You had hoped that you had gone far enough on the road to the heavenly Jerusalem to be out of the reach of these ignominious sins; but there are days when they seem to have been so numerous, and to represent so much of unsubdued passion and of decomposing faith, that your spirit fairly sinks within you, and you doubt whether you will ever reach the heavenly goal. Certainly you cannot fall back for comfort on your own heart, which is not in the same mood for two days running. You know it to be perpetually changing, or, as the Bible says, "deceitful above all things."^a In the morning you are happy and hopeful, and before night you are in misery and despair. To-day you are in ecstasies as if with Paradise in full view; to-morrow you are a victim of the most gloomy depression. One week the heaven of your inner life is as the clear blue sky,

^a Jer. xvii. 9.

with the brilliant rays of the Eternal Sun playing upon you ; the next, all is overclouded, and you are apparently in the darkest shadow. Certainly this poor, changeful, vacillating heart of ours yields but a sorry resource in the troubles of life. Our only real deliverance lies in rising out of ourselves, and taking firm hold of the promises and the Person of Him Who sitteth above the waterflood^a of human feeling, and Who does not change.^b In His own time He will be as good as His word ; the disappointments will be seen to have been steps in our probation ; the temptations to humiliating faults, after teaching us self-distrust, will have vanished ; the varying moods of joy and depression will have been exchanged for a tranquil and assured happiness.

This is the closing lesson of the Magnificat. Mary leaves us with the conviction that God's promises may for long remain unfulfilled, but that they will be fulfilled at last. "He hath holpen His servant Israel, as He promised to our forefathers." For us too of to-day "the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie : though it tarry, wait for it ; because it will surely come, it will not tarry."^c

^a Ps. xxix. 9.

^b Mal. iii. 6.

^c Hab. ii. 3.

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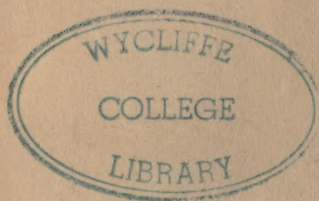
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